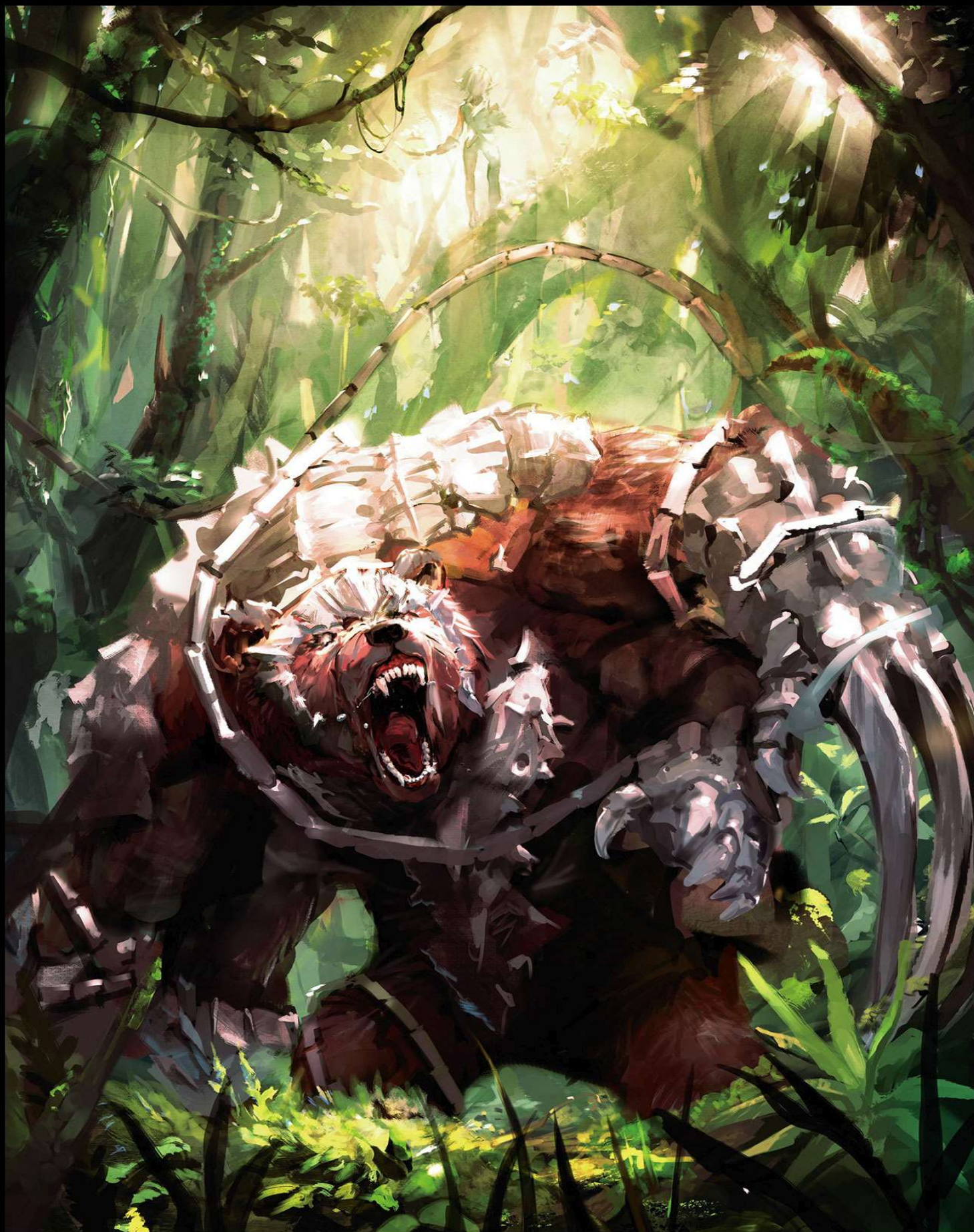








OVERLORD

Volume 15: The Half-Elf God-kin | Part I

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Prologue

Prologue

The leader of the Theocracy — the Pontifex Maximus.

Those that held the greatest authority in their sects — the Six Cardinals.

The heads of the Judiciary, the Legislature, and the Executive branch.

The Director of the Research Institute — responsible for magic research and development.

The Commander in Chief — also known as the Grand Marshal.

Gathered here were the twelve members that made up the supreme executive body of the Theocracy. This was where those with the highest authority in the Theocracy congregated, where they set out the general roadmap for the country.

It was neither spacious nor opulent, and none of those in attendance were without a somber expression.

Not many people would be joyous given the occasion of course. The assembly was composed of people who would consider each other comrades, and they were familiar enough with one another to allow for some occasional humor. That is to say, the mood among them was once a lot more light-hearted, but not at this time. The air in the room felt as though it had frozen solid.

“The Sorcerer Kingdom has begun their invasion of the Kingdom, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it had started long before now. The Sorcerer Kingdom is truly terrifying, the Kingdom never had an inkling of their plans for an entire month. They have suppressed the Windflower and Clearwater scriptures, which had served as our eyes and ears. Had it not been for the Thousand Leagues Astrologer, we might have discovered it even later... It is fair to conclude that the Kingdom’s fate is sealed. We don’t have much time on our hands, so we should start recruiting adventurers as soon as possible.”

“We’ve already begun recruiting in earnest,” replied the Cardinal of Earth, Raymond Zarg Lauransan.

“Isn’t it a waste to just allow the Sorcerer Kingdom to plunder that country’s

magic items? Can't we get our hands on them somehow? Especially the treasures of the Kingdom. The Amulet of Immortality, Guardian Armor, Gauntlets of Vitality, and..." The Research Director said as he counted up with his fingers as if to emphasize the importance of the last item, "...Razor Edge."

"No, there's nothing we can do about that. The number of people we can deploy is limited. Even our own people within the Kingdom will not be able to make it out alive."

"...The Sorcerer Kingdom will be at our doorsteps soon. Ever since that Warrior-Captain died in battle, his replacement, the one called... Ung-lo? Is the one with the items now, right?" The Grand Marshal asked, to which the Research Director answered, "Brain, correct? Yes, if we could extract him along with those items it would be for the best. He shouldn't be the type to run towards his own death, right? We might anger him at first but he'll soon be grateful to us."

"According to our investigation, he's not someone who would do that." The Cardinal of Fire, Berenice Nagua Santini, was one of the only two women within the executive body. "Your opinion of him is quite high," the other woman, the head of the Judiciary, said with a smile.

"Indeed. We Cardinals do evaluate him highly, but we know he's not the type of person to accept our invitation. That's why we gave the order not to contact him."

"So he's the same as that Warrior-Captain... Well, we fundamentally cannot understand the thoughts of people who don't look at the bigger picture and allow themselves to be controlled by such irrational emotions."

A few people glared at the head of the Legislature as he spoke, so he felt the need to backtrack. "My apologies, perhaps that was a bit too harsh. Still, in my opinion — taking into consideration the future of mankind, such reckless disregard for life is a terrible mentality to have. I will stand by my point no matter who stands against it."

"I won't deny that." The one who uttered those words was Dominic Ihre Partouche, the Cardinal of Wind and one of the people who glared earlier. "However, just as we have lines we would never cross, so does he."

"Does Guelfi-sensei agree?" The Research Director asked, not fully convinced.

Ginedine Delan Guelfi, the Cardinal of Water — an elderly man whose appearance was akin to that of a dried log — nodded in confirmation. "I shall not ask further on this matter then."

"While I'm glad so many talents have come to join our nation, what is their

condition?”

Many adventurer teams were already on their way to the Theocracy. Most were Mythrill rank or higher, but they were also using the Clearwater Scripture's intelligence to invite people with potential.

“Not very good— no, it's just bad” The one in charge of receiving the adventurers, Yvon Jasna Dracowa, the Cardinal of light, chimed in.

“We may have convinced them to come, but the fact that they had to abandon so many people has left a thorn in their hearts— Or in other words, they're wimps.”

One of the participants spoke in a way that let everyone know that the conversation didn't need to be so formal. But in response, Yvon gave a stern reply: “You should always be formal in front of your bosses.”

He became flustered. “I mean, superiors,” he corrected himself.

It was true that in a meeting strictly between cardinals even Yvon was informal from time to time. But that was only possible because all six of them were close.

“So... we think we should get rid of this ‘thorn’ as soon as possible.”

“But how?” the head of the Judiciary asked. Raymond replied, “Well, if the ‘thorn’ set in because they couldn't save people, then it can be healed by saving people. We'll send them to the Draconic Kingdom first. We'll have them fight the beastmen there.”

“Ah, I see,” those around him said out loud.

Their intelligence indicated that the Draconic Kingdom had become diplomatically closer to the Sorcerer Kingdom and had even purchased undead from them. Terribly powerful undead at that.

If they allowed this to continue, the Theocracy's influence within the Draconic Kingdom would diminish while the Sorcerer Kingdom would only gain more sway. As a preventive measure, this proposal could be a good move. However, someone was still worried:

“If we send the adventurers we recruited somewhere beyond our surveillance they could leak our secret operations during the war. Would that not expose our covert actions to the Sorcerer Kingdom? Would it not be safer to keep them within our borders for now?”

“That's likely not a problem. They know the situation in the Kingdom. They regret leaving all those people behind. It's unlikely that people like that would ever work with such a cruel nation. Though there is the possibility of them obtaining the information through mind-controlling magic.”

“Hold on, compared to that, wouldn’t it be more of a problem should the Sorcerer Kingdom discover that our country has magic casters capable of using teleportation magic?”

“Indeed, that’s true.”

“We’ve always pretended to use magic items to teleport people but some adventurers might have seen through our ruse. Even if we were to impose a gag order on them, there’s no way to know where and how information could leak. Maybe we should avoid revealing we have that card in our hand.”

Ginedine Delan Guelfi, the Cardinal of Water, coughed a few times before he spoke. “Hm, excuse me. While I understand your thought process, is it not true that revealing our hand to our opponent can make them more cautious about acting recklessly? This move could also work to restrain our opponents. At least that’s what I think.”

“I agree with Sensei’s idea. ...the Tri-Arts Magic Caster is a great example of someone who’s capable of teleportation. We don’t need to be so nervous.”

“Hmm. But how many would know about that? ‘What kind of magic is the great magic caster of the Empire capable of’ is a question that even we don’t have a definite answer for, is it not?”

“Someone like that wouldn’t care much for intelligence on teleportation magic anyway.”

All sorts of ideas were suggested. The Pontifex Maximus felt that they would not be able to reach a decision if this continued on, so he decided on a simple vote. And so, it was decided that they would deploy the adventurers to provide support to the Draconic Kingdom.

That said, the recruited adventurers were no different from mercenaries in the eyes of the Theocracy. They weren’t expecting any loyalty out of them. Thus, the leaders of the Theocracy gathered here didn’t mind even if they chose to stay in the Draconic Kingdom. After all, rescuing them from the Kingdom wasn’t to strengthen the Theocracy, but to avoid the possibility of strong humans dying in vain.

“If we manage to develop the technique to create spell scrolls of the fifth tier and above, even something like teleportation magic will become easily available.”

“But even though we have worked on it for centuries, nothing came of it, not even the smallest bit of progress.”

One of the Theocracy’s secret technologies was the manufacturing method for scrolls up to the fourth tier. This was something the surrounding countries did

not have. The Theocracy possesses many other secret technologies such as this. After all, they've been developing them for hundreds of years—all to protect humanity from the races surpassing them.

For example, they also succeeded in creating the potion known as “God’s blood.” However, its cost-effectiveness was terrible, so research continued to this day.

“Still, why would the Sorcerer King order such massacres? Even if supplies en route to the Holy Kingdom were robbed, this was still an overreaction. What does the military make of it?”

“The first reason is for it to act as a show of strength.”

The Grand Marshal raised one finger. Multiple heads nodded in agreement.

“Second, the Sorcerer King is an undead after all.”

“‘There’s a deep-seated hatred for the living in him, and he is controlled by that hatred.’ Perhaps some may hold that belief, but I disagree. Even if we assume he has been waiting for an opportune time to go to war, if we take into account his previous actions, this incident still feels strange.”

“That’s right. Even us from the military believe that line of thought leads to nowhere,” said the Grand Marshal with a stern face. But then other voices arose in protest saying things like: “then just say that without posturing,” or “you just wanted to copy Raymond,” or “you need to consider time and place before you speak.”

“Ehem... And lastly the most probable one, reason number three:” he said as he raised his third finger, “to create a natural spawning area for the undead, like the Katze Plains.”

“That is possible,” someone murmured.

The Slaine Theocracy was a country that boasted an abundance of divine magic casters, so the highest echelon in attendance fully understood what the Grand Marshal meant.

The Sorcerer King’s plan was to probably expand that unholy land endlessly and then absorb any undead that spawned there into his kingdom. Such a thing was normally impossible, but the Sorcerer King, being an undead himself, was an exception.

They had heard that he had assumed control of the Katze Plains. Perhaps he had obtained something from there that would prompt him to do something like this.

“If that’s the case, we can anticipate their next move.”

“Why are you so certain of that?”

“He created those unholy lands to serve as a buffer between him and the Council State. That way, the unholy lands will help protect his country from the Council state, then—”

“—He’ll be able to turn his attention towards the Theocracy, huh.”

The room fell into silence. All members present compared the Sorcerer Kingdom to their own country, especially in terms of military power.

Everyone bore pained expressions. No one could maintain composure.

The reaction was understandable, as they were reminded of the intel they had received regarding the Sorcerer Kingdom during their last meeting. The Sorcerer Kingdom’s battle against the Kingdom on the Katze Plains displayed their undeniably overwhelming and malevolent power.

The Sorcerer Kingdom was extremely tricky to deal with, even for the trump card of the Theocracy, the Black Scripture and its God-kin members. Moreover, the true power of the Sorcerer Kingdom remained unknown. The more they investigated, the more it felt like staring into a dark, bottomless abyss.

“No number of troops would be enough. So we have to form a comprehensive alliance with the Council State, huh...”

“That’s right. Then whenever we’re in a pinch, we will be able to receive reinforcements!”

Everyone smiled sarcastically.

Reinforcements powerful enough to save the Theocracy would never be sent. That much was plain to see.

True cooperation is impossible for states with completely different goals and ideals. Some reinforcement could be expected if an alliance was formed, but there was no way that the Platinum Dragon Lord himself would come to their aid.

If either the Theocracy or the Council State fell, then the full might of the Sorcerer Kingdom would come to bear on the nation not yet affected. To avoid that, the correct move would be full cooperation: to pool their strengths together against the Sorcerer Kingdom. However, hypothetically, if the alliance were to invade the Sorcerer Kingdom and win, what would happen afterward? Naturally, the two countries would return to seeing each other as potential enemies.

They just needed to think a bit about the future and they’d realize it was in their best interests to let the other country’s soldiers fall to the Sorcerer Kingdom. Plus, if they establish an alliance, people will flow between their

nations and that would make the intelligence warfare between them even more intense.

Complete and mutual trust was never going to happen, even if an alliance was formed.

It was more realistic to think of winning with only the Theocracy's troops.

And besides, even if war broke out with the Sorcerer Kingdom, both parties would avoid total war so they don't destroy each other. If they didn't, the only winner would be the Council State.

The ideal situation would be a three-way deadlock, but that would require a more equal power balance.

"Submitting to the Sorcerer Kingdom would not be a bad thing. We could work behind the scenes for decades or centuries until we make them crumble from the inside. It would also grant us a clearer picture of the Sorcerer Kingdom's internal affairs."

"The Empire became a vassal too, so it isn't completely unfeasible. Also, judging by how the Empire was treated, it is not that bad of an option."

"But if we do that, will we be able to convince our citizens?"

"It would be very difficult. Normal citizens won't ever be convinced. And if we handle it poorly, riots could break out."

"Just brand them as fools."

"Oy, that's a bit too extreme. Save that as the last resort. First things first, unlike us, citizens don't have access to all this information."

"Then, should we make everything we know about the Sorcerer Kingdom public? Aren't we keeping it a secret right now precisely because it led to unrest in the past?"

"Stop arguing. Even if the Sorcerer Kingdom took the Kingdom's capital, they wouldn't have time to pacify the population and administer the new territory. We still have some time to think about such things—"

"—No, we can't say that for certain. After all, the Sorcerer Kingdom already destroyed multiple cities and villages. There's no guarantee they won't do the same to the capital."

The capital was very populous. Killing all those people seemed a bit unrealistic but the Sorcerer Kingdom might be capable of doing it.

"An undead, full of hatred of the living, huh."

"We let our guard down because there was no unnecessary killing at E-Rantel, didn't we?"

“The Empire is now a vassal, they have intervened with matters within the Holy Kingdom and the Draconic Kingdom, and now they are trampling over the Kingdom. Next is our turn, I’m sure. ‘Submit or die.’ There’s nothing more clichéd than that but even so, I’m sure the Sorcerer Kingdom will eventually force us to make that decision. If we want to avoid that we’ll need to solve one of our problems while confronting the Sorcerer Kingdom.”

“Indeed. We should annihilate that rotten Elf as soon as possible. Although our future relationship with the Sorcerer Kingdom is not yet clear, battling on two fronts would be foolish.”

A huge amount of effort was put into exterminating the Elven country, even before the Sorcerer Kingdom was established. That was also why they couldn’t dedicate their full attention to the Sorcerer Kingdom.

“Direct confrontation with the Sorcerer Kingdom is the worst-case scenario, considering their overwhelming military power. Still, it is our duty to make plans with the worst case in mind, and I’m sure they’d prefer to end everything in a short time.”

“The Sorcerer Kingdom probably won’t intervene while their army is in the Kingdom, but it’s possible they’ll try to prevent us from responding to this sudden turn of events. For example, they could make undead appear at our borders as a distraction while pretending that they naturally appeared. We must take some steps to prepare for that possibility.”

“Yes... at the same time, we must work to give humanity a chance, even if it’s a small one.”

A few of them nodded faithfully.

“We’ll evacuate some of the citizens. To the land of hope. No, to the ends of despair”

They may call it an ‘evacuation,’ but the Theocracy didn’t know of any other country that’d take their citizens in. Therefore, they weren’t planning to make them refugees.

The Theocracy had a single shelter outside its borders. You could call it a hidden village, but originally— 600 years ago, it was where humans lived when they only knew fear and flight.

It was guarded by one of the Six Scriptures, the Ashendust Scripture.

“If we’re going to evacuate them we should start preparing right now. Who are we choosing?”

“We can’t choose randomly. We’ll obviously stay behind. As for the rest of the

citizens, how about we make them elect a representative and make that person choose?”

“No, Lauransan-sama should go.”

“What?”

“In the unlikely event that we’re annihilated, only a former member of the Black Scripture like you would be able to protect and teach those who are left, right?”

“I’m not as strong as before. And besides, the heads of the organization are the ones who should remain no matter what happens. If they were to disappear, people would lose faith in the organization. “

“But—”

“No—”

“I was thinking—”

As the discussion grew heated, the Pontifex Maximus finally spoke, “Getting heated about this is pointless. It is an important matter, but let’s postpone it for now.”

No one objected.

“Right. Then, let us talk about the most important issue. The Elves. It’s fine if the rest of the Elves run away, but we can’t let the Elven King go. We have to corner that fucker no matter what— “

The Pontifex Maximus was like a completely different person, with palpable hatred on his face. Raymond nodded in agreement.

“This will give Certain Death a chance to choose.”

“Indeed. Even if the Platinum Dragon Lord sensed her leaving the country, he is unlikely to pursue the matter strongly given the current situation. Personally, I think we should give the Elven King a taste of all the suffering in the world and then kill him, but that girl’s happiness takes priority. I’m counting on you all.

“Understood.”



Chapter 1 | To Take A Paid Vacation

1

After reading through the contents of the thick binder to the end, Ainz returned to the first page and stamped his personal seal with a plop. After a brief moment of hesitation, he also stamped the seal of approval. With this, the matter printed in this binder — from Ainz’s point of view, some sort of ultra-high-level solution for a political issue — was approved and Albedo could begin the process of selecting the appropriate personnel to dispatch.

Ainz handed the binder to Lumière, who was waiting by his side. This concluded the last of his work for the day. Ainz glanced over at the clock.

The clock’s hands read 10:30.

Ainz’s work started at 10:00. In other words, his workday didn’t last even half an hour, but this was the status quo as of late. Although Ainz’s work generally gets completed before noon, this was still far too quick.

Starting work this late was something that the salaryman Suzuki Satoru had never experienced, swing shifts aside, but that was nothing more than Satoru’s personal experience. It wasn’t rare for those employed by the megacorporations to start work late and according to Ulbert, the fact that such a shift system

existed was a kind of privilege in itself.

Well, considering the work lives of this world's inhabitants (for example, villagers like Enri and Nfirea), starting work at sunrise and going to bed at sunset is the routine.

It was mostly the same for the city dwellers, although their mornings started and their nights ended a bit later compared to the villagers. The availability of magical illumination — or the lack thereof — is the most important factor governing this. Nobles who had easy access to magical illumination were able to start their work late in the morning since they were able to work as late into the night as was necessary.

So, did all of Nazarick start work at 10:00? Not at all.

Nazarick was a black company among black companies.

(T/N: A black company is a Japanese term for companies with poor working conditions.)

First, the regular maids were divided into morning and night shifts, and their working hours were long. It was the same for Cocytus' vassals guarding the Ninth Floor. Break times were vaguely defined at best and hardly anyone took short rests. There was no time set aside for things like snacks or smoke breaks.

Even so, about 90% of those with such schedules were not discontented with their workload.

As someone who wanted to create a pleasant work environment for his subordinates, Ainz had asked the maids about this situation. His impression upon listening to their answers was, "there must be something wrong with their heads." No, perhaps it would be better to say that their loyalty was sky-high.

Ainz shuddered a bit when they said with serious faces that it's completely normal to work without rest when you have items to nullify fatigue.

Furthermore, the only demand made by the remaining 10% that were dissatisfied with their schedules was that they wanted even more work.

However — that's in the past.

Perhaps it was him just being selfish, but Ainz had always wanted to provide his employees with generous benefits. To this end, Ainz started by focusing his attention on the regular maids.

This was because first of all, they were extremely low-leveled. The fact that they were all attractive women was also significant. While Ainz didn't want to play favorites, he always ends up being soft on the maids compared to Cocytus' vassals.

If he accomplished his wish through an order, nearly everyone in Nazarick would obey it without question, but doing so might damage their morale.

So he needed to make a good argument, which he did with the following explanation:

In the future, the regular maids might need to train and manage human maids. When that time comes, they would need to take care not to overwork the human maids with the work routine they had been following up till now.

While they protested initially, Ainz ultimately succeeded in reducing their working hours and increasing their leisure time.

Previously, they got one day off every forty-one days, but it had now been doubled.

They get two now.

Ainz still felt like nothing had really changed, but there would likely be stronger resistance if he tried to push further. Or rather, that was how Ainz read the mood, so he had to stand down at that point.

Consequently, Ainz failed to incorporate the day-off system — paid leaves, summer vacations, public holidays, etc.

Although he framed it as being for the benefit of the maids, perhaps the real reason he pushed for some kind of paid leave system despite the NPC's opposition was because of Suzuki Satoru's yearning for a concept he never got to experience for himself.

And so Ainz ended up stumbling upon another idea.

As the ruler of Nazarick, Ainz reduced his own workload. He wanted everyone to think that it was alright to take it easy because Ainz himself wasn't doing too much work. Of course, another part of the reason was the possibility that Nazarick would end up in shambles if he did any more than minimum work.

But this idea ended in failure.

The denizens of Nazarick ended up thinking that they had to work even harder to make up for him as it was natural for Ainz to not have to work.

As a result, Ainz's already meager workload, which mainly consisted of just approving things, was reduced even further.

This was probably for the best. There would be disastrous consequences for Nazarick if the less-than-competent Ainz took over a larger share of the workload, but the fact that the others had to work more as a result was something that he did feel bad about.

Haa...

Ainz took a glance from the corner of his eye at the pair of maids who were staring at him unblinking, with stern expressions, and fire in their eyes. One was waiting on Ainz for the day and the other was assigned to his room; both of them would immediately ask “is there anything I can do to assist you?” if he met their eyes. To avoid such an encounter, he could only take peeks like this.

They don't have to take things so seriously... I wish they'd relax a bit... This tense atmosphere is making my stomach cramp up...

Ainz tried to remember the last time he saw the maids smile. Mentally sighing one last time, he called on the maids standing by his side.

“...Well then, Lumière.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama?”

“Just to confirm, was that the last of my work for the day?”

“Yes, Ainz-sama. That was the last of it.”

The reason he asked the maid attending him was because secretarial tasks were being handled by the regular maids during Albedo's absence.

It seemed as though there were no audiences or negotiations in today's schedule. Even so, work has a tendency to crop up unexpectedly so he couldn't let his guard down. His caution was warranted, as the unplanned work that might emerge in the wake of a [Message] from Entoma tended to be the troublesome type that ends up making his non-existent stomach churn.

“Is that so...”

Ainz looked at the other desk in his room.

Even though the desk had been set up at Albedo's insistence, she was not there now.

Most of the time Albedo worked side-by-side with Ainz in this room, but it had only been a few days since the fall of the Royal capital, so she was quite busy at the moment. She could be seen running around Nazarick and sometimes traveling afar to deal with the issue in person, so her presence here was rare.

Upon questioning the maids about Albedo's status when he wasn't around, Ainz found out that she had been on edge recently. Maybe it was because she was overworked, or maybe it was because she wasn't able to meet with him as often as she'd like.

If it's the latter, maybe it would be best if I increase the time she spends with me

There was no reason to deny her wish if that was enough to get her back in high spirits.

“.....”

Because no one would speak if Ainz did not, the room fell into complete silence. Truth be told, Ainz wanted the kind of workplace that was filled with idle chatter, but his experience over these past few years told him that there was no way the maids would participate in such a thing.

So lonely.

It seems like this is going to continue for the rest of my life... Well, there's nothing to be done about it. However, maybe there's a need for a change of environment.

Normally Ainz would spend his free time on many different activities.

Equestrianism. Reading books on business under the guise of reading scholarly works. Also books on governance — the reason none of that material managed to stick in his mind was probably because he only ever skimmed through them. It's certainly not because his skull was empty.

He would also conduct various magical experiments.

Recently, he had also started training under Pandora's Actor, in addition to his arms training under Cocytus.

"Now then..."

He spoke as though he was talking to himself, while letting his words reach the entire room — this was done on purpose.

It was time to start taking action.

The plan he would soon commence was to help Aura and Mare make some friends. The first step was to make preparations toward this end. As for what kind of friends they should make, Dark Elves would be his number one choice. Following that should be members of closely related races like Elves. Though he was expecting a future where all races lived in peaceful coexistence, introducing them out of the blue to Lizardmen or Goblins — as their first friends — was not a good idea.

First, they should proceed with similar races.

He looked at Lumière.

"...We will move to the Sixth Floor. Attend me."

"Understood."

Although she would follow along even if he had stayed silent, Ainz felt that it was probably better to say it out loud.

With Lumière in tow, Ainz teleported to the Sixth Floor using the power of his Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown. If he had ordered Lumière to bring the people he wanted to meet to his room, she would have done so. As the supreme ruler of Nazarick, it probably would be more suitable to call over the people in question.

However, he did not do so because he wanted matters to proceed amicably. For that reason, it would be better if Ainz went in person to express his sincerity.

They would probably feel a sense of intimacy and respect if he went to them instead of rudely demanding their attendance. If the fact that the ruler of this land specially appearing before them could put the right amount of pressure on them, it would be even better.

The people he wanted to meet were the three elves that were captured when those Workers intruded into Nazarick.

...We should have questioned those elves in detail when we moved them to the Sixth Floor... Well, we couldn't back then.

A few years had passed since then, and while some basic information had been gathered about their circumstances, they had not been asked questions about the Elven country or any personal information. That was because Ainz wanted to maintain his position as the friendly undead who had saved the elves from their slavemaster's tyranny. If he had drilled them for specifics about the location of their homes or about the Elven race, they might have suspected that he had ulterior motives and so he wouldn't have been able to preserve his image.

But wouldn't it be the same if they were to be asked those questions now? Not really.

The situation now was different from when they were just the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. It wouldn't be suspicious at all if Nazarick—the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown, which had brought many races under its reign, wished to gain information on the Elven country to open diplomatic relations.

Now I have a suitable excuse for everything I wanted to ask them, plus I don't think the twins are the kind to have bullied them... It would be great if they completely opened their hearts to me, but I should temper my expectations. I would have given better orders back then, if only I could have thought this far ahead...

Even as he thought about this, Ainz disliked the idea of Aura and Mare having to treat those elves with feigned kindness on his orders. Though if it was Demiurge or Albedo he wouldn't have given a second thought.

As with the earlier comparison between the regular maids and Cocytus' vassals, it was not good to let one's judgment be influenced by appearances. However, Ainz could not rid himself of his bias, probably because he was just an ordinary person.

With Lumière following, Ainz walked down the dimly lit corridor. A large

portcullis loomed ahead with sunlight spilling in through the latticed gratings.

Further ahead was the circular arena on the Sixth Floor.

It was possible to directly teleport to the twins' residence using his Ring, but he chose not to because—

—As if it was an automatic door, the portcullis quickly rose up. Ainz suddenly had a sense of déjà vu. He had visited them in the same way on his first day in this world, when he also met the small figure standing before him now.

“Welcome Ainz-sama, we have been waiting for you!”

The energetic voice of a young girl welcomed him.

“Umm. I have some business to attend to, Aura — I will be relying on you.”

He was fortunate that Aura was the one on guard duty today.

As the Sorcerer Kingdom expanded, the Floor Guardians ended up taking on a wider range of duties; as a result, they often had to operate outside of Nazarick. But, at any given time two or three of the following Floor Guardians: Albedo, Demiurge, Aura, Mare, Cocytus, and Shalltear, must remain within Nazarick.

Usually, it was the trio Albedo, Cocytus, and Shalltear, but sometimes Cocytus had to attend to the Lizardmen village and Shalltear had to take care of the dragons.

During such times, the others would stay behind.

This system was not developed on Ainz's orders.

There was a time when Ainz had considered making Cocytus responsible for the defense of Nazarick and designating Shalltear as his assistant, but the size of the domains they managed was much different now. So, Ainz thought it would be fine if the others headed out as long as they left at least one of the Guardians behind.

That said, he felt hesitant about telling that to the Guardians.

It was because Ainz was afraid that as an absolute ruler, his opinion would end up taking precedence over the independent thoughts and actions of the Guardians. He wanted to respect their autonomy.

Additionally, Ainz's opinions were probably meaningless anyway when Albedo and Demiurge, who were both far more intelligent than Ainz, were in agreement. A Guardian's ideas would certainly be better than Ainz's with his below-average intellect.

“Okay! I understand, Ainz-sama. So what brings you here today?”

“—Umu.”

Ainz gave a solemn response to the smiling Aura. To be honest, there was no

need to be so solemn just now. The usual “Umu” spoken in a regal manner would have sufficed. However, he ended up responding in a heavy tone as he thought about whether things would go smoothly from here on out.

It ended up having quite an effect on Aura, as her expression turned serious in an instant.

This was bad, it was definitely going to cause another misunderstanding.

“Fu—,” Ainz nearly swore out loud. He would not be able to keep his act up if they noticed that something was wrong. He was confident that if he was pressed on it, his act would break down and he could do nothing but ad-lib his way out.

“Furst, yes, first of all, I came here to meet the elves.”

“Just to make sure, would I be right to assume you are speaking of those elf prisoners?”

Sorry. As I thought, I shouldn't have covered it up in such an awkward way... please don't look at me with such sincere eyes... I want to see that smile from before...

“...It's just as you have said. I want to know what they are doing now, and then I want to ask them some things to prepare for the next step.”

“Understood. Then I will bring them here.”

Ainz knew that this would happen. Or rather, that any denizen of Nazarick would probably respond the same way as Aura did now. That's why Ainz continued with the explanation he had prepared beforehand — although it was more of a deception than an explanation.

“N-no, there is no need for that. Because I am here to achieve two objectives.”

“...Two objectives, is it? Ainz-sama has considered so many things just for a meeting with prisoners, I see...”

She looked at Ainz with eyes full of admiration. Ainz looked away, unable to say that he had just prepared in advance for possible arguments from Aura and Mare. “My first objective is to put pressure on them by directly approaching them. The other objective... is not directly related to elves, but all sorts of creatures have been moved to the Sixth Floor after we brought the Great Forest of Tob completely under our control. I thought I should see how things have turned out with my own eyes. How about it, Aura? I would like you to show me around the place that has changed the most, if you don't mind.”

Basically, management of the Floors was left to their respective Guardians, with Ainz rarely intervening. Therefore, Ainz had never gotten the chance to examine the changes firsthand. That was proof of the trust Ainz had placed on the Guardians. If a subordinate's work was going well, a superior butting in could

only be considered a nuisance.

Since he was already going through the trouble of visiting the elves, he thought he might as well take a look. He didn't know how Aura interpreted it but the air around her suddenly became more tense.

“—Understood. So the ‘First’ was about this.” Aura replied with a strained expression.

“And there's no need for the ‘if you don't mind’ Ainz-sama! Ainz-sama is the absolute ruler of Nazarick. You do not need a Guardian's permission wherever you may choose to go!”

“Eh...? Umm, umu. I'm grateful to hear you say so.”

“To say that you're grateful... Well, in that case, I think the Field of Flowers is the area with the most changes, so please let me guide you there.”

“Field of Flowers—”Ainz searched through his memories. “It's the place where some of the plant-type monsters were moved, right?”

“Yes, that's correct. Then there's the segregated area where we have relocated the non-intelligent plant-type monsters, and an area inhabited by the intelligent plant-type monsters, some of whom have settled in the village we built a while back and are living like humans do. Would you like to proceed there?”

That village had been constructed inside of Nazarick in case they met other Players in the future, to show that Nazarick was capable of coexisting peacefully with humans. While it comprised several small houses and fields of crops, it was difficult to call something of that scale a village.

But as there was no other suitable word for it, it ended up being called a village nevertheless.

“Does Ainz-sama remember the dryad called Pinison?”

“...Yes, I remember them well.”

This was mostly a lie, or more accurately, he could not remember their face or other such details, only a vague silhouette. So he did in fact remember someone like that. As the fight that occurred shortly after meeting them had left a stronger impression, they were more like an adjunct memory in comparison. Frankly put, Ainz was not good at remembering things like people's names or faces. He was the type to write down his impression of the person he just met on the back of their business card.

“That one is now something like a village chief.”

Hearing more from Aura, it seemed as though the plant-type monsters were a capricious lot and the title of village head was just a self-proclaimed position. But

having acted as an intermediary between the plant-type monsters that first came to Nazarick and other plant-type monsters, it had become moderately popular. You could say it was the representative for the plant-type monsters that came from the outside.

There were some plant-type monsters that were stronger than Pinison and tended not to listen to it, but with Aura and Mare's support there hadn't been any problems so far.

The plant-type monsters arriving in Nazarick had all received Aura and Mare's welcome. This "Welcome" consisted of a demonstration of Aura's and Mare's strength, as well as a display of the host of other monsters that followed them. After having realized the difference between their respective strengths, most of the monsters would end up obediently following the twins' orders.

Also, when the monsters saw the cash shop Woodland Dragons that accompanied Mare, they seemed to be in awe of him, wondering if he was a god. The final nail in that coffin was when they saw him create rain and increase the nutritional levels of the soil to frightening levels.

"But I don't think all the monsters worship him as a god. Maybe it's because some monsters recognize the events as the work of druidic magic. If I had to explain it, he is more like an existence to be extolled..."

Hmm, Aura pondered.

Ainz more or less understood. It would be something akin to praising a Player as a "god" for creating an awesome-looking set of gear. Or maybe it was something like being an idol. Perhaps it was a mixture of the two.

"—I see, I understand the gist of it. Anyhow, if you two are able to subjugate them without any problems then that's fine. There should be no issues with whatever means or methods you may employ— ...ah, umm. That's that."

Ainz was now regretting his choice of words when they were managing just fine. Instead of blathering meaningless words at length, he should have just praised them honestly with a simple "Well done."

He stole a quick glance at Aura's expression, and it didn't seem like she was particularly bothered. But maybe she was just not letting it show on her face.

Superiors should not use words that can demoralize their subordinates, haven't I read that in some of those books on management...?

Ainz gave himself a mental admonition to take more care when choosing his words. And to keep tone and manner of speech in mind as well.

"...Ahem. I would like to see the village but let's just keep it to the Field of

Flowers this time. I apologize for that, especially after you went through the trouble of suggesting something specific.”

Aura waved her hands about in distress.

“P-please don’t mind! As I said before, Ainz-sama is the absolute ruler of Nazarick! Please proceed through this Floor as you please, Ainz-sama. Please let me apologize for my arrogance in proposing such a suggestion!”

“N-no need...”

...Why are you apologizing? Or rather... Isn’t that an odd reaction from Aura, not unlike her reaction a little while ago? Is it possible that my attempt to gloss over my mistake when we first met has resulted in this weird reaction? Does she think that I’m plotting something?

Aura’s words didn’t wait for the unsettled Ainz.

“There exists no place in Nazarick where Ainz-sama should be denied entrance— No, no such place should exist within the entirety of this world!”

No, I think there are many places in this world that I shouldn’t be entering, Ainz thought. Notably, there were many places where he thought only women should be allowed to enter, but if he voiced such an opinion then Aura would assuredly reply that it was fine for Ainz to enter regardless. So he didn’t reply, as it would quickly turn into an awkward situation (for Ainz at least) if he did.

Taking a quick peek at Lumière revealed that she was nodding along as if to say that was how it should be. Whatever, it was bothersome to come up with reasons for why that wasn’t the case.

Taking care to not let such inner feelings show, Ainz spoke gently to Aura.

“Well, then please show me the way.”

“Understood! Leave it to me.” Aura thumped her chest. “So— how should we travel? Would you like to ride something?”

“That’s acceptable. May I impose on you?”

“Yes! Please leave it to me!”

Aura shifted her gaze to somewhere far away and wrinkled her brows in concentration for a few seconds.

“There are other magical beasts nearby but I decided to call over Fen and Quadracile. Is that alright?”

“You don’t need my approval for each and every thing you do here. If Aura deems something acceptable, then I have no objections.”

“Thank you. Please wait for a bit”

“Aah, then I’ll be in your care.”

Ainz replied as he looked around the arena.

The most enjoyable walks in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick — such an activity elicited a different kind of joy than the sort of entertainment available on the Ninth and Tenth Floors — could be found on the Fifth and Sixth Floors. Although it was extremely rare, if the timing was right one could see a luminescent phenomenon known as an Aurora on the Fifth Floor. Unfortunately, it seemed that the probability of its appearance was set very low. In contrast, the Sixth Floor was a place that was entertaining enough for a normal walk. They were about to travel through such a Floor.

Ainz gave a small smile as he felt his stomach ease a little.



Excusing herself, Aura stepped away from her Master and Lumière to take out a necklace. This necklace was a legacy class item that allowed for two-way communication with its pair. Although it was a relatively weak item, she always kept it equipped because the item's ability was inaccessible to the user unless it had been continuously equipped for two days. Usually items with such special conditions tended to be strong, but that was not the case for this necklace. Moreover, since a condition for the necklace's usage was that the speaker must hold it in hand, it was difficult to use during tough battles.

But those limitations mentioned above are the item's only usage restrictions, and it does allow for indefinite two-way communication. It was debatable whether such an item was good enough to warrant taking up an equipment slot.

“Mare, Ainz-sama came to visit.”

After a short silence, Mare's voice echoed in her head.

“「Eh, eh? Ainz-sama came here in person? What's going on?」”

“What else could it be? It's an inspection, an inspection!”

“「Eeeh!?!」”

“Probably to check if we and the Area Guardians are properly managing this Floor. ...He decided to inspect only the recently altered Field of Flowers for now... but we should double-check that the Area Guardians are not slacking off right now.”

“「Is it because... this Floor is the one with the most outsiders? Or is he just visiting each Floor in turn?」”

“—Ahh, maybe that’s the case.”

Something clicked into place inside of Aura’s mind. Of course, it could have been nothing more than Aura’s own imagination, but she thought that Mare was probably right.

“Ainz-sama said he had two objectives in mind but this is Ainz-sama we are talking about... I don’t think that it’s just those two. Maybe putting some pressure on us like this was his unspoken third objective.”

“ 「Aah... Maybe he is confirming that we are handling our most important and fundamental responsibilities diligently even though our work outside has greatly increased?」 ”

They had a vague idea as to why he was doing this.

Those who had once envied Albedo and Demiurge for their packed schedules — for example, Shalltear and Cocytus — were now increasingly being assigned work outside of Nazarick. They had been given the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty with their extraordinary military accomplishments, especially during the destruction of the Kingdom. Perhaps their master had noticed the kind of festive mood this had created.

No matter what auxiliary duties they may have been conferred, Aura and the others were first and foremost Floor Guardians of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. They had the absolute and unchanging duty of defending, managing, and controlling the Floors that they had been assigned. Maybe Ainz wanted to make sure they were not neglecting their most fundamental duties in light of their increasing engagement with their newly assigned duties.

For Aura and Mare, receiving a dissatisfactory rating directly from their master was the same as saying they had failed as Floor Guardians. If the other Floor Guardians — especially the Guardian Overseer Albedo — heard of this, they would surely reprimand the twins while staring daggers at them. The fact that their master had not told them directly was probably an act of kindness.

“Maybe he anticipates that we will spread the word of our inspection to the other Floor Guardians, which would motivate them to get their affairs in order...”

“ 「That’s possible. In that case, that might be his fourth objective? I’m sure that there must be something more...」 ”

Aura couldn’t think of anything more. The same went for Mare. It was a little frustrating for them to think that Demiurge or Albedo would surely be able to anticipate Ainz’s goals much more accurately than they could.

“Anyhow, let’s make preparations.”

“ 「...Eh? Make preparations?」 ”

“Ah, sorry. I haven't told you yet. Didn't I say earlier that Ainz had two objectives? The first was the inspection and the second was to meet with the elves that were assigned to those vacant rooms.”

“ 「Ah, those people... They are so noisy, always going 'royal family this, royal family that.' I hope Ainz-sama takes them away.」 ”

Mare spoke with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

Mare, whose favorite pastime was lounging about on his futon, seemed to be regarded by those three as someone that was incapable of properly taking care of himself, and so they ended up trying to care for him many more times over than they did for Aura. This included hanging up his futon to dry, helping him get dressed, and sometimes even attempting to bathe him. This was quite too much for Mare, but as he had been entrusted with their wellbeing by his master's orders, he couldn't just bluntly refuse their efforts at caretaking.

“—Ah, Fen and Quadracile are close by. I don't know how long it will take for them to get here, but make preparations immediately, Mare.”

“ 「Um. Leave it to me.」 ”

Aura cut the connection with Mare and returned back to her master.



If any invaders having experienced the horrors of Nazarick were to gaze upon the Field of Flowers with its myriad flowers in bloom on the Sixth Floor, they would probably think that it was concealment for some flower-mimicking monster or a deadly trap. But, there was no such thing here in this place.

Even though the place invited extreme suspicion, the fact of the matter was that there were no traps here awaiting the intruders.

There existed flower-mimicking plant and insectoid monsters in YGGDRASIL, but no such monsters were placed here. Furthermore, there wasn't even an Area Guardian stationed here, unlike what was usually the case with such areas.

This place, which could be considered to be under Aura and Mare's direct supervision, was really just a beautiful flower field.

Certainly, there had been plans to turn it into a trap.

There was no way that any intruders that managed to reach the Sixth Floor would regard this place to be a mere flower field. They would either be wary and

hesitant to approach or they would take the initiative and burn it away with fire-based attacks that possessed secondary effects. As a countermeasure for such an occasion, there were talks of growing plants that would disperse lethal poison or a paralyzing agent when stimulated by fire. However, the three female members of the guild vehemently opposed such an idea, and so the plan was reworked. The result was this unassuming field of flowers.

That was how Ainz remembered the Field of Flowers, but the field looked different now.

Buds large enough to encompass an entire person rose out of the Field of Flowers. There were twelve of them. A single glance was enough to find them suspect — or rather, one would be certain that there was definitely something suspicious going on.

Ainz examined his memories.

There were many monsters in this world that Ainz did not know of, but Ainz was sure that a similar monster had existed in YGGDRASIL.

A recollection flashed through his mind like a shooting star.

“Am I correct in thinking that’s an Alraune?”

“Yes! That’s correct!”

They were not originally placed in Nazarick nor were they among those summoned after Nazarick’s arrival in this world. There was no doubt that they were a foreign species — one of those brought from the Great Forest of Tob.

In the center of the Field of Flowers, there was a shovel stuck firmly into the ground. This was a divine class item named Earth Recover.

Earth Recover was a divine class item with ridiculously high durability, but on the other hand its offensive capabilities were extremely low. That was because most of its data capacity was dedicated to secondary abilities.

Also in the Field of Flowers was a magical beast resembling a giant angora rabbit — a Spear Needle. The idyllic scene of it sitting in the middle of the Field of Flowers munching on a giant carrot had a fairy-tale-like charm, but that was probably not the reason why it was placed here.

While Ainz couldn’t confirm his suspicions without asking Aura, he strongly suspected that it was here as a warden.

Despite its appearances, it was still a creature whose level was in the high 60s. Whatever the alraunes might get up to, there was no doubt that it could easily annihilate them should the need arise.

“By the way, the carrot that the child over there is gnawing on was gathered

from the farm. Pinison and the other plant-type monsters used their respective powers to give it large amounts of nutrients, which transformed it from a normal carrot into that giant thing.”

“Not nurtured but transformed? Is it safe to let it eat that then? Though weak poisons would have no effect on something of that level...”

“It’s not poisonous. I checked with the Head Chef and he gave it passing marks as an ingredient. Regrettably, it doesn’t provide any buffing effects unlike the materials that were originally stored in Nazarick. It has simply grown bigger and sweeter.”

“That’s a great success as a foodstuff, isn’t it? Can the ordinary farmers of the Sorcerer Kingdom cultivate it?”

“It’s impossible. At present, it’s difficult to grow them in large quantities even with the help of the plant-type monsters. Even if we use the power of Earth Recover, it seems that just one of them can suck up a considerable amount of the soil’s nutrients... it won’t go so far as turning the land into a desert, but unless we use magic to recover the soil’s nutrients, the fields would need to be left fallow for at least a year...”

As Ainz and the others looked over the field, one of the buds — the largest one — slowly unfurled.

“That’s the Alraune Lord. It’s in charge of all fourteen alraunes here.”

Aura introduced it briskly. There was no doubt she was talking about the Alraune that was opening up.

“Fourteen?” Ainz quickly asked, sneakily recounting the number of Alraunes. “Not twelve?”

“Yes. The other two were recently born and are hiding by the flowers. Should I drag them out?”

“...No, there’s no need for that.”

Born inside Nazarick, would it be counted as one of Nazarick’s monsters? Or was it different? What were its abilities? Many questions came to his mind, but before he could ask Aura the bud had finished blooming.

As he had expected, inside was a feminine-looking monster. Rather, it looked very similar to some monsters he had seen in YGGDRASIL. For something named as a Lord of its kind, not much was different about it except for its size.

Its hair and eyes were the same color as the petals of its flower, and its entire body was green, the same color as its stalk. It was not wearing any clothes, but

since its skin seemed to be formed from an amalgam of thin stems, it looked rather uncanny.

The features that were probably eyes were slanted upwards and didn't look friendly at all. It gave the impression that the owner of those eyes was irritated.

Suddenly, Ainz felt a brief pang of nostalgia. It reminded him of a certain girl from the Holy Kingdom with a pair of fierce-looking eyes.

Ainz wasn't one to remember faces easily, but those eyes were something that left a deep impression on him.

The monster's expression warped into something wicked.

"Good morning Aura-sama. On behalf of the green races, I give you thanks for the wonderful sunlight we have received today."

There was no hostility in that crystal clear voice. On the contrary, Ainz could even sense some respect. It seemed that the smile from before was just a sincere expression of welcome, though even now he couldn't help but feel that it was plotting something behind that smile.

The other alraunes rustled their petals, but it didn't look like they planned to open up. However, they could be seen stealing glances at Ainz, their heads unable to be completely obscured by their petals.

Not knowing what that behavior signified, it could not be said that they were being impolite. Perhaps this was an expression of utmost respect in Alraune culture.

"And so—"

The Alraune Lord turned its gaze towards Ainz.

"This is the ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, the king among kings who completely dominates not only that forest but also this entire area, who founded the Sorcerer Kingdom where many diverse races may live together in peace. The absolute ruler, His Majesty, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown!"

After Aura proudly announced Ainz's presence, the Alraune Lord's face turned even more wicked. The petals of the other Alraunes trembled and they slowly started to hide their faces. Was this because they were alarmed or afraid? Or maybe this was a sign of great admiration?

He couldn't be sure from their expressions alone, but Ainz felt like it was probably the latter.

"I-it's an honor to receive your grace, sovereign of this land, the ruler of the Sorcerer Kingdom, and above all, the master of Mare-sama and Aura-sama, Your Majesty, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown."

Her wide open arms were probably a form of greeting.

“I am named Violet. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Oi, isn't that just the color of your hair? Ainz thought.

To put it simply, it was a straightforward name with little thought put into it. Not that this was something that Ainz could say out loud. Making fun of a name that had (probably) been given to it by its parents to its face was not a good idea.

“Umm. I will remember it. Anyhow, this land is entrusted to Aura and Mare. It is unlikely that there will ever be a situation in which you receive direct instruction from me. You should continue to act in accordance with the twins' orders.”

He ended his sentence with vague words because he did not know how the twins were managing these alraunes. Ainz had experienced for himself the troubles that could crop up when the CEO and department head gave conflicting orders.

In the first place, he didn't have anything of value to say because he didn't know what work the Alraunes had been given or how they were being handled.

“Understood, Your Majesty the Sorcerer King.”

Isn't its etiquette amazing for someone who is supposed to have lived in the forest? Ainz praised the monster's sense of propriety. *When and where did it gain this knowledge? Was she trained by the twins? Or somewhere else—*

—Or though how it was speaking might carry such nuance, perhaps in actuality it was speaking in a more Alraune-esque manner? For example, it could be saying something like “Ainz is a very big bud.”

(T/N: Ainz seems to be considering whether auto-translate shenanigans are at play here.)

It was good that they could communicate with each other, but Ainz wondered whether this disconnect might create any problems. Well, it wasn't like he really cared about being called a big bud anyway.

And so, Ainz looked around the Field of Flowers.

He thought that the Alraunes were obstructing the view a bit, but at least everything else was still as he remembered. With a barely discernible smile — though his face didn't move of course — he briskly turned around, trying to look as stylish as possible as he twirled his robe. Aura's pet Fenrir and Itzamna were waiting for him there, along with Lumière.

After he started walking, Aura quickly fell in step and inquired, “Is it fine to leave it at just that? Will you grant an audience to the other alraunes?”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I saw what I wanted to see. Now, can you take me to those elves?”

“Understood.” Aura replied, and together with Aura, Ainz rode Fen through the Sixth Floor.

Soon they were nearing their destination. Looking up, they could see the slightly misshapen tree that was Aura’s and Mare’s residence peeking through the branches of the tall trees.

After a few seconds, they were clear of the forest and a meadow spread out ahead of them. In the center of the meadow stood a stout tree, wider than it was tall, with its overgrown branches casting shadows across the ground.

Standing before an opening in the trunk of the tree was Mare and the three elves that waited on him. There was no doubt they were there to welcome Ainz. He didn’t know when Aura had found the time to contact Mare, but if it had been immediately after he had arrived on the floor, he might have kept them waiting for quite a while.

It wasn’t like he had promised to meet them at a fixed time, so Ainz didn’t have any reason to feel guilty.

But, well...

Suppose that Ainz was a branch manager and got a call that the CEO traveling all the way from headquarters had just arrived at the nearest railway station. He too would have immediately gone out to wait in front of the branch office. It was inconceivable that he wouldn’t prepare a welcome. With that thought in mind, it could be said that Ainz was at fault for not giving them the exact time he would be coming over.

Ainz wanted to say that he was not at fault because he hadn’t thought of that point until he had already arrived, but could that really be considered a legitimate excuse? He wasn’t sure how long they had waited for him, but he knew that if he said “You didn’t have to wait for me,” he would have nothing to say in response to the rebuke that he should be more mindful of others’ feelings and the position they were in.

Mare was in his usual outfit while the elves were wearing plain fatigues (which some may consider to be enough for them). Ainz would have preferred if they were better dressed, but since Aura and Mare had decided that it was good enough, that was not something he could say.

Also—

Lumière and the other maids would probably be displeased if the elves were to wear

maid uniforms.

The regular maids were quite proud of the fact that they served Ainz. He had heard from Sebas that while maid candidates from the outside would not be bullied directly, they would be indirectly bullied by not being taught how to properly perform their duties and so on.

They probably wouldn't mind much in this case since the elves acted the part of maids serving Aura and Mare, but he couldn't be 100% sure. Besides, they might not like the elves wearing the same uniform as them. The maids think of their uniform as battle gear.

The Fenrir arrived before the four people waiting there.

"Thank you for coming out here to welcome me. I am very pleased with the depth of your loyalty."

Before dismounting the Fenrir, Ainz took the initiative to speak first. He had considered waiting until Mare had greeted him first, but decided that this approach would leave a better impression.

"Th-thank you very much."

Smiling, Mare bowed his head, with the three elves quickly following suit.

Good!

Ainz pumped his fist mentally at the apparent good start he made and looked at the elves after they raised their heads.

All of their faces—no, their entire bodies look stiff. The elves gulped as they received Ainz's stare.

Whichever way you looked at it, all of them were too tense. The question was whether it was caused by fear or something else. In other words, whether this was the fear of imminent death for appearing irreverent or the tension one felt when they met a famous person.

Just in case, Ainz checked if he was releasing his aura. He was not projecting any hostility or killing intent towards the elves so that shouldn't be the cause of their fear.

This is unexpectedly troublesome, though it went smoothly until now...

Opponents tended to be sensitive to the emotions of strong beings like Ainz and end up getting dominated by fear. In a certain sense, this was like getting read by the opponent, so he also received various pointers during training with Cocytus to prevent this. On the other hand, Ainz himself couldn't sense the killing intent of others.

He forced Cocytus, who loathed the idea, to direct killing intent towards him

and did end up feeling some pressure. However, he was not sure if that was the thing known as killing intent. Perhaps the undead were just not good at sensing those kinds of things.

The undead were completely immune against mental effects, so perhaps sensing killing intent could be counted as a mental effect in a broad sense.

That said, Shalltear could sense it just fine. Cocytus said “Maybe. Increasing. One’s. Ability. As. A. Warrior. Makes. It. Easier. To. Sense. Such. Emotion”. Ainz thought to himself that he should probably include learning the ability to sense such emotions as one of his future goals. Perhaps it was just that Ainz was too thick-skulled to sense such emotions.

oops—too many pointless thoughts

Mare started speaking at the same time Ainz started collecting himself together.

“U-umm, y-you see, about Ainz-sama w-wanting to meet w-with these e-elves today, is something the matter?”

Although Mare was more timid than usual, it seems like he had already heard the details from Aura. This made things easier.

Ainz shifted his gaze from Mare to the elves with an exaggerated movement. The elves turned to look at their feet like they were trying to escape his gaze. They were visibly trembling.

However you looked at it, this was not born from being tense.

This is probably from fear. Are they still on guard even though they have been subordinated to a pair of dark elf children? Honestly, after pledging their loyalty and living here in peace all this time as the living, it would have been great if they understood that this undead is different from the ones they knew... Well, my appearance is like this. Even if their minds understood, it would be difficult for their hearts to accept

In this world, the undead were said to hate the living and were considered to be the enemy of all living beings. So it was only natural for these elves to be on guard and tremble in fear at the undead being in front of them.

Maybe their reaction would have been different if they lived under Shalltear and got used to the undead, but there were barely any undead on the Sixth Floor, so there was nothing they could do about this.

—Seeing something once is more effective than hearing about it a hundred times after all

It was the same in YGGDRASIL. Techniques categorized as Player skills were easier to understand by seeing them directly in contrast to just getting a verbal

explanation. Of course, he also needed to practice it a few times—no, hundreds of times later to learn it himself.

“—Yes, that’s right Mare. I want to ask one...yes, one simple question of those behind you.”

Elves started to breathe shallower and faster.

They didn’t need to be so afraid, Ainz wanted to say from the bottom of his heart. Of course, he couldn’t just say, “nothing to fear~” in a cheery voice. He couldn’t break his character of Nazarick’s ruler, Ainz Ooal Gown, but it would be troublesome if they didn’t feel at ease.

“...you don’t have to worry so much. I didn’t come here to harm you.”

He wanted to continue with “so be at ease”, but stopped after thinking that even he wouldn’t believe it if told so by a fearsome being. Even if the CEO invited them to an informal gathering, he would doubt there would be any employee who would ignore their status that easily.

Haa. Bothersome...

While he knew it would be a bad move, he suddenly felt like casting [Dominate]. It was because he was not confident he could cajole them or make them feel at ease.

One would remember what they said and did even after said magic ended. Furthermore, the use of mind control magic is considered barbaric in other countries.

He didn’t know how elves saw it, but they certainly would not find it to be pleasant.

In fact, if someone did that to anyone from Nazarick, even Ainz would wait for an opportunity to kill them.

Of course, Ainz wouldn’t hesitate to use it to gather important intelligence. If anything he would even be willing to cast [Control Amnesia] without a doubt.

But, there’s no need to go that far in the present scenario. It’s not like he was sure they did something bad or was hiding information from him.

—Zen, beru? It was different back then. If I use magic to get information that I could easily get by talking to them, it would cast doubts on Aura’s and Mare’s abilities

The twins, no, everyone in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick had undying loyalty towards Ainz, they believed that whatever he did would be correct (which was a dangerous way of thought in his opinion)

That’s why he should not try to give the impression that he was dissatisfied

with their work as much as possible. He could not fathom what such a misunderstanding could lead to, plus it's not like he was dissatisfied with their work.

If he was going to use mind control magic, he should have done that in the first place.

He didn't do that when they were initially captured because he wanted to make them allies through goodwill—he wanted to position himself as their savior. Considering such an investment was placed in them up till this point, using mind control magic to force them would be short-sighted.

“—um. First of all, this isn't the place to have a conversation. Let's move elsewhere.”

If he was not confident in opening their hearts through words, he could just use a different method. First, a change of place.

“In that case, let's go upstairs!”

“Y-yes! Please do that!”

“Aa—”

Ainz turned his gaze upwards—towards the giant tree.

How was this place as the venue for their conversation?

In a certain sense you could call this the elves' home turf, so wouldn't it be easier for them to talk here? But if they did that, who was going to prepare the drinks? Would it be Aura and Mare? No, it wouldn't be an issue if Lumière, who came along, did that.

Not bad. In the end, the only difference is whether the conversation would take place in a harmonious or tense atmosphere. Whether they would open their mouths out of goodwill, or out of pressure. Ummm, there's not much time left. Weird, even though I have already prepared presentation material and simulated their questions and responses... like I did in the Dwarf Kingdom and the Holy Kingdom... Am I getting a bit out of touch lately?

He was invited by the other side, so he should reply as soon as possible. Unfortunately, he would always end up overthinking in such situations.

...Speaking of which, I never saw the regular maids providing the guests with drinks without orders. N-no, they did it... once... maybe

There was no way they didn't prepare the drinks. When Ainz ordered them before, they immediately provided a choice of drinks. So they were probably stored somewhere in Ainz's room. The regular maids were working themselves hard every day to become the perfect maids. It was hard to think that they would

forget or were just insensitive to such needs.

So it meant they probably thought that since Ainz the ruler did not drink, then the others shouldn't as well. It's similar to how it was awkward for subordinates to take a drink when the CEO didn't.

The correct way to do things would be to prepare drinks for Ainz (even though he couldn't drink) and then on top of that provide them for others as well.

I feel sorry for the guests we had until now...

He decided to talk about it with Pestonya later, as he was getting flustered that he was wasting too much brain power on things unrelated to this meeting.

Wait, that's not what I should be thinking about now. I should be deciding on the place for our drinks. The twins would think that I don't like having tea at their house if I wait any longer. That will be bad. But—!

Troubled, Ainz looked around.

“Ah!”

Ainz suppressed his shoulders from twitching at Aura's sudden vocalization. His mind was also forcibly cleared of excessive thoughts with this sudden scare.

“Is Ainz-sama thinking of having the conversation somewhere else on the Sixth Floor?”

“Mm, umm. That's right. The weather is great so I was thinking maybe we should do it outdoors.”

“In that case, I will make preparations. We have parasols and a table with us! These were the things Bukubukuchagama-sama used when she had to converse with the other Supreme Beings! We can use them. There's a vacant house in the village. Also, I haven't shown it to Ainz-sama yet, but there's a gazebo on this floor too!”

“I remember visiting it with everyone.”

Ainz suddenly remembered the time spent with his comrades talking about meaningless things.

—I feel like I am remembering them less and less recently

Perhaps it was because he stopped seeing his comrades' shadows in the NPCs. It's either because he was slowly forgetting about his former comrades or maybe he had started seeing the NPCs increasingly as independent entities. It would be fine if it was the latter case, but it would be sad if it turned out to be the former.

All of Suzuki Satoru's pleasant memories that shine even now were made with his former comrades.

—That's not it! These are not past memories! Ainz Ooal Gown is still here! It is still

alive!

Ainz let out a sigh while his heart burned with emotions he could not describe. He turned his gaze towards Aura and Mare.

...Everyone... I wonder how they felt when those people left this place... No, they were still NPCs back then. If at that moment... oops

He shook his head.

His thoughts were going on too many tangents. He had to make sure this plan succeeded.

Ainz took a look around, it seemed like no one noticed anything was weird with him.

They were probably thinking that he was musing on Aura's proposal. Now was a good time to put a lid on his thoughts.

"Well then... This floor is not bad but this is such a rare occasion, we may as well have our conversation somewhere else. Maybe it's good to have them take a look at other places under our rule."

If he wanted to count on their goodwill, it would be better if it was in a place they were used to, but he just wanted to get away from here.

In that case, what would be a good place? There were two options. One was E-Rantel. The other one was Nazarick's Ninth floor.

These elves would form a good impression if they were to see the various races coexisting in E-Rantel, but he couldn't be sure that there wouldn't be any problems. If something violent were to occur, like them being attacked, he had many ways to protect the elves and it would also help earn the elves' trust. However, it would be troublesome if someone did something to give the elves a negative impression. For example, if someone were to put on an act and call the Sorcerer King the source of all their hardships.

As a part of the plan, maybe he could mind control some humans and have them work in tandem, but it would just make the elves suspicious.

In the first place, Ainz was a source of fear in E-Rantel. Though there were people who admired him, they were in the minority. The ratio was something like 70 to 30 unfortunately. Therefore, it would be a bad idea if he were to let them see people in fear of him. Also, there was the danger of the elves getting the wrong idea that the various races in E-Rantel were brought there as slaves.

With that in mind... As I thought, it should be the Ninth Floor. In that case, where on the Ninth Floor?

Should it be Ainz's room, counting it as practice for Lumière in providing

refreshments?

Ainz pondered.

Getting drinks in the CEO's room or having drinks in a cafe. Which one will put him at ease if he was in their place?

"There's only one answer. There's nothing else to think about. Let's go to the Ninth Floor. There is the cafeteria. Let's talk while having a light lunch—did you have your lunch yet?"

"N-no, not yet"

"I see. Then the timing's just right."

Actually, Ainz was also trying to loosen them up by having their stomachs filled.

He took some time getting here so he was worried that they had already finished their lunch. Well no, they were informed beforehand of his arrival. They couldn't have had leeway to have lunch when they did not know the exact time he would reach them.

"Good. Then let's have our talk while having lunch."

Ainz turned his gaze towards the elves. "How about that?"

The elves started panicking, trying to push each other into being the one to give an answer. The one in the middle ended up replying, more as a result of her being pressured on both sides rather than her willingly standing up as their representative.

"Y-yes. If it's fine with Aura-sama and Mare-sama."

It was certainly not something he could decide on without asking the twins, Ainz thought, so he asked them as well.

"If it's no problem, I want to take them to the cafeteria. What do you think? I want the both of you to come as well if possible."

"It's okay with us! Right, Mare?"

"Uh, nn. Ah, no, I mean yes. I am fine with it just as s-sister said."

"That's good. Well then—" Ainz looked at the elves. "I am going to open a [Gate]."

2

They first returned to the Sixth floor's entrance with [Gate]. Then, Ainz sent a [Message] to Aureole to open a Gate to the Ninth Floor. Naturally, the gate between the Eighth and Ninth Floors worked without an issue. If that wasn't the case, then it was highly likely the Ariadne system would be triggered.

There really was no need to take this roundabout way. Though he couldn't teleport everyone there at once due to the capacity limit of the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown, he could have just made the trip twice. It was Ainz's cautious heart that made him go through all this trouble just to give the elves the wrong impression. The fact was that he was extremely reluctant about showing the ring's abilities to others.

Cocytus' subordinates, who were on guard duty, bowed their heads deeply at Ainz's arrival.

“—Thank you for your hard work.”

Ainz gave them a simple magnanimous greeting, befitting the aura of a ruler.

Following Aura and Lumière, the three elves came out from the Gate and bunched up together. They froze in their tracks the moment they saw the monsters bowing to Ainz.

It was not like Cocytus' vassals were being hostile toward them. That was a natural reaction, just like how a normal person walking through a forest would freeze if they saw a tiger suddenly appearing out of a bush.

One of the elves was slightly pushed from behind.

As they froze before the gate, they were being a nuisance for Mare, who walked behind them. Even though he only pushed her lightly (probably controlling himself), it was fatal for the tense elf's sense of balance.

“Hiyee...” letting a pitiful cry, she collapsed onto the floor. Blood drained from

the other elves' faces, and though they immediately tried to get her back up, the collapsed elf had trouble standing back up. It looked like she couldn't force her legs to work.

"...Don't be afraid. There's no one who would lay a hand on you in Nazarick."

"Y-yes..."

They probably didn't doubt Ainz's words, but even so, their tension wouldn't let up. The elves by her side were quickly nodding their heads, their hair flying around from how hard they were nodding. As for the elf still on the floor, it seemed like she was on the brink of tears.

Ainz could say with confidence that it would be problematic going forward if this continued. He had to make their hearts a bit more pliable at the very least.

"...Let's head for someplace to take a short rest before heading to the cafeteria...[Gate]. Aura, pick her up."

"Okay!"

"N-no need for Aura-sama to do something like t..."

"—It's fine, It's fine. Okay, let's go."

Aura briskly lifted the collapsed elf, ignoring her pleas, and put her over her shoulder. Of course, as she wore work fatigues, there was no skirt to peek under.

The place connected by the [Gate]'s dark hemisphere was Ainz's personal room.

There were three bowing maids inside with cleaning equipment at their feet.

"Good work everyone. I will leave soon after taking a short rest here. I don't mind if you continue with your work."

The maids replied in the affirmative and bowed again while the others came out from the [Gate].

The elves started gawking at their surroundings with their mouths open, looking like idiots. It seemed like they found everything around them quite exotic, different from the twins' home. They also looked less tense compared to before, probably because the regular maids were far more agreeable than Cocytus's monster-like vassals.

"Aura. Let her sit in that chair over there."

After Ainz pointed to Albedo's chair, Aura quickly put the elf down on it. Albedo's desk was spotless, just like her. By the way, Ainz's desk was spotless too, albeit in a different sense of the word.

"Th-thank you very much..."

Ainz tried to speak as gently as possible to the seated elf bowing her head, "no

need, I can understand your shock, but just as I said before, be at ease. No one in Nazarick would bring any harm to you, so I don't mind if you take it easy."

Well, it's not like they would suddenly feel at peace with just those words.

Ainz turned his back towards the elves, went over to one of the maids, and issued an order to her quietly, "we will head to the cafeteria soon. Make sure that we will not meet anyone except you maids on our way there. Do the same thing in cafet..." -eria as well, he wanted to say, but did not. "No, nevermind. There's no problem with the cafeteria being used as usual. Rather, it would be better if the others use it like normal."

"Yes, understood. I will take my leave then."

"Sorry for interrupting your work, but I'll be relying on you."

"Such words are not needed, Ainz-sama."

He approached her because she was the maid nearest to him but seeing how she threw looks of victory at the other maids, it seemed she thought of it differently. Her colleagues frowned a bit at this with undeniable vexation.

The maid with orders turned her back to her colleagues and walked out of the room with a spring in her step.

Ainz could sense (which should be rare for him as an undead) the other maids concentrating their gazes on his back. No doubt their eyes were filled with anticipation for any special kind of work that could be coming their way. By the way, he couldn't perceive anything from Lumière, probably because being his maid-in-waiting for the day was special in itself.

It felt like he was sitting on needles (of course that wasn't the intention of the maids), Ainz forced himself to look away from the maids and towards the elves.

He confirmed that their breaths had returned to normal.

"It seems like there are no more problems...let's head out then"

He didn't want to rush them as he thought it would look forceful, but he didn't want to stay here any longer.

After he confirmed the elf could walk again, Ainz took the lead and left the room. The maids looking at him with chagrin could be ignored.

While on the way to the cafeteria, he could sometimes hear the elves' gasps of admiration from behind him, saying "amazing" and "beautiful".

Ainz wanted to boast but he endured it and continued to walk ahead without looking behind him.

They eventually reached the cafeteria without meeting any other NPCs along the way. Except for the fact that it took more time than usual because of how

slow the gawking elves were—also because Ainz slowed down when they passed through the places he took special pride in—there were no other incidents.

Nazarick's cafeteria was created with a company or a school's cafeteria as its inspiration (of course, Ainz's school or company did not have them so he didn't know if that was really true), so the mood was a bit different from a restaurant.

This was Ainz's first visit here since the time when he visited all the establishments in Nazarick just after they first came to this world, but it looked like nothing had changed much. He could faintly hear young ladies engaging in animated conversations and the sound of cutlery from inside.

It was probably filled with the regular maids and others who also worked on the Ninth Floor. Maybe there were Area Guardians present as well. It was a bit late for lunch but perhaps due to the shift system, it looked lively. If they could see the maids eating their lunch peacefully, the elves should understand what kind of place this was. They might feel like outsiders but still, this atmosphere of everyday life should calm them. That was why he did not order them to clear the cafeteria.

But the moment Ainz entered the room, the mood suddenly shifted.

First, it turned completely silent.

The happy voices from before and the lively sounds of diners completely disappeared. The mood froze over, it was completely out of place for a cafeteria.

Then—Everyone turned to look at Ainz, their eyes wide open and their motions at a standstill.

This was the feeling of being an outsider.

As though he was a heteromorph with negative karma who just stepped into Alfheim.

“—Don't mind us. Continue with your lunch.”

A few here and there, mostly the regular maids, started eating again upon hearing what Ainz said, but there was no indication that their conversations were going to start again. Everyone ate in silence.

Ainz did not want to interrupt their lunch at all. He started to feel a bit isolated but, well—on second thought, it's not like he couldn't understand their feelings.

If a CEO who had never visited till now suddenly appeared in the cafeteria, it would probably turn out like this. Suzuki Satoru would likely do the same in this situation. Perhaps it would have been different if this company was a lot smaller, the kind where the distance between the boss and the employees was much closer.

That's probably impossible in this case though...

It would be extremely difficult to suddenly change his image as the admirable dictator Ainz-sama into one of an Ainz-san that was loved by everyone.

Maybe if everyone found out he was an idiot, such a change could be possible, but he would not be able to bear it if he ended up getting scorned instead (which was unlikely).

“Well then, let's enter.”

Turning back to the party, he tried to observe the elves' reactions discreetly.

He didn't even need to observe them much, they were clearly shriveling up. Understandable. They should have noticed the harmonious mood in the cafeteria before Ainz's arrival. This was what he meant by “the sudden heteromorph in Alfheim”.

He couldn't think of a way to solve this.

Perhaps they will get used to this over time, Ainz walked into the cafeteria with such optimistic thoughts.

He didn't want to make the maids even more tense, so he approached a random table far from them and pointed at the seat opposite his.

“You can sit there.”

The elves started looking at each other with troubled expressions. It looked like they were trying to decide who was going to be stuck with the onus of sitting in front of Ainz. He was probably right in thinking that.

“...I see. Maybe Elven customs are different from ours, so let's just keep this informal and not worry about those things.”

He tried to give them a way out by acting like he interpreted their hesitation differently. It would not be good if they hesitated too much, he was also a bit afraid of the twins' reaction if they hesitated too much.

“You there. Sit opposite of me.”

Ainz pointed at the elf standing at the back. If he remembered correctly, she never stood in the middle of the elves, so he thought it was fair that she should be the one who was going to be stuck with him.

Honestly speaking, he did not want to be treated like some kind of baggage. That said, as someone who understood their feelings all too well, he decided to be practical.

It was quick after that.

The seats beside the specified elf's were immediately taken. Aura and Mare sat beside Ainz.

He wanted to say many things about the fact that Lumière was standing behind him, but decided to bottle it up in the end.

“Now then— Sorry, but this is my first time using the cafeteria, so explain to me a bit about how it works at this hour.”

Ainz asked Lumière because as a regular maid she should have used the cafeteria just like how her fellow maids were doing now.

“First things first—yes. I want to order drinks, so is there something like a menu?”

“There are free drinks and a buffet system at this time. We are supposed to get the drinks and a simple salad from over there by ourselves.”

Looking at where Lumière was pointing at, he could see a row of pitchers that seem to hold the drinks. Beside them were multiple chafing dishes.

“And you can also select one item from the lunch menu here.”

“I see...”

“As the chef is in the kitchen, I believe he will prepare any dish Ainz-sama wishes.”

“Is that so? But there’s no need. If there’s a fixed lunch menu, let’s just select something from there.”

Lumière handed over a sheet of paper.

A menu was printed on it, in Japanese. The elves probably wouldn’t be able to read this. Also—

“...ever heard of Katsudon?”

Elves shook their heads to say no.

“...Aura, Mare, what do these elves usually eat?”

“Just the normal food?”

“Y-yes. M-most of the time, it’s the s-same as ours.”

In that case, did the twins’ never have katsudon? No, they were usually getting their meals served by the delivery service, and they should also be able to make it by themselves.

“Have you never eaten katsudon?”

“No, we have had it before. It’s probably just that they don’t know its name.”

“Ah, so it’s something like that...”

The menu did not have any holograms attached to it, so it stood to reason that they couldn’t match the appearance with the name.

Ainz wanted to ask for “the chef’s recommendation,” but fearing the situation in which he would be told that everything was recommended, he decided against

it. “Here...that reminds me. Do you normally eat meat?”

After he saw the elves nod, Ainz selected an item from the menu.

“Hamburg steak meals for everyone here.”

“As for the sauces you can select among the demi-glace, Japanese-style sauce, or cream-mustard sauce. You can also select rice or bread to go along with it.”

“...how about bread and demi-glace?”

He could understand the demi-glace and the Japanese-style sauces, but he wondered what the cream-mustard would taste like.

The fact that he couldn’t taste them himself due to his body was regrettable.

“Okay!”

“Y-yes. It’s ok for m-me too.”

Following the twins’ energetic voices, the elves also nodded quickly in tow. It looked like there were no objections.

“Then, that will be my order.”

Fuu, Ainz breathed out. It didn’t look like Lumière was going to head to the kitchen to relay the order, Ainz wondered why. Perhaps someone who was working here would come over to receive their order.

“What about the drinks, Ainz-sama?”

“—aah. I forgot about that. Everyone can go and get what they like. That should be fine, right?”

“Yes. Then I will bring over Ainz-sama’s drink myself. What shall it be?”

“Something suitable—ah, no, get me a hot coffee.”

“Understood.”

The others went to the table with the drinks with Aura at their lead.

Elsewhere, the kitchen suddenly became noisy after Lumière went over there and said something.

As he continued to look, someone came out from the kitchen.

A giant cleaver hung by his waist. A wok on his back. A slovenly, naked torso with “Fresh Meat!!” tattooed on it. And finally, a gold chain around his neck.

Though his face may look like an orc’s, he was an ork, a similar species that was much closer to wild beasts.

(T/N: “ork” last appeared in the EESS, where the kanji read “wild ork” but it’s just katakana here)

There was a pure white toque on his head and a pure white apron around his waist.

This man was the Area Guardian of the cafeteria and the head chef himself.

Shihoutu Tokitu.

Shihoutu Tokitu quickly ran over to Ainz and kneeled. *Won't the chef's clothes get dirty?* is what Ainz thought upon seeing that.

"Ainz-sama! We welcome you!"

"It's been a long time, Shihoutu Tokitu. I am glad to see that you are the same as ever."

"HAH!"

Though Ainz said that he looked the same, the last time he met him was just after they were teleported here, back when he visited all the NPCs. Since it had been so long, he was not exactly confident in noticing changes if there were any.

"No, maybe you are slightly thinner now?"

"If Ainz-sama thinks so, then it is so!"

That's not what I meant! Ainz swallowed his words.

"I noticed the absence of Ainz-sama's order among the ones the maid relayed...I get it now!"

A masculine smile (though he couldn't be sure as he did not understand orc expressions) welled up on Shihoutu Tokitu's face. *No, you don't get it at all*, Ainz thought. Was he ever actually understood even once in such situations? Regrettably, he didn't think so.

"I am to prepare food suitable for a Supreme Being, for the absolute ruler of Nazarick, Ainz-sama!"

While Ainz was muttering "there he goes!" in his mind, Shihoutu Tokitu stood up with vigor and shouted in the kitchen's direction.

"From now on it's do or die! A dish suitable for Ainz-sama! A food festival that won't stop for at least a week, begins!"

"Ooooo," the sounds of admiration rose from the maids who were listening.

"Oi, wait."

"HAH!"

Shihoutu Tokitu returned back to Ainz and kneeled again.

It was hard to say this to someone shouting "I am going to do it! I am going to do it!" with all their might. Ainz generally thought that he should go along with what NPCs wanted, but this was a bit too much for him.

"...It looks like you are misunderstanding something. Just to be sure, you do know that I can't eat food as an undead, right?"

"HAH! So we are to make something that can be enjoyed by sight and smell! That is what Ainz-sama has in mind! Understood!"

Ainz replied to Shihoutu Tokitu while he was trying to stand back up, “oi, wait”
“HAH!”

“Don’t be hasty. I am trying to say that I can’t eat, so don’t waste any ingredients.”

“What are you saying Ainz-sama! Ingredients used for Ainz-sama cannot be considered wasted! Yes!” Shihoutu Tokitu said as he stood up and turned towards the cafeteria. That brought about a round of applause. Not just the maids but even Aura and Mare joined in on it. The elves quickly followed the others in panic.

You don’t have to follow along, you know... Ainz grumbled internally.

“Well, I will start at once!”

“Oi, wait.”

“HAH!”

Ainz spoke honestly to the kneeling Shihoutu Tokitu, “I am going to be frank. I did not come here to eat. I came here to have an enjoyable—yes, an enjoyable conversation. I understand your expression of welcome to a suffocating extent, but I do not care for it that much. Can I get you to understand that I just want to have a calm conversation?”

Ainz could understand why Shihoutu Tokitu was filled with such fanatical motivation. Someone like the ruler of Nazarick, who couldn’t possibly visit such a place, came today. He probably just wanted to give the best welcome possible, but that’s not what Ainz was here for.

“HAH! Then let me reserve the whole place!”

“Oi, wait.”

“HAH!”

“Don’t make a mountain out of a molehill. I will repeat myself, I only came here to have a little chat. There’s no need to take things so far, understood?”

Ainz took a quick glance at the others—especially the elves—and found that they were just staring at him with serious expressions.

The maids were already half away from their seats, prepared to leave at any time. The twins acted like this was just normal, while the elves seemed like they were afraid that the situation was going to get out of hand. Even though he selected this place specifically because he didn’t want the elves to feel like that—
[board’s bookmark for proofing]

“—I am not being modest, that’s really the reason why I came here. All of you may continue as usual. Please treat me like you would any other guest.”

“HAH! But! To treat a Supreme Being such as Ainz-sama in the same way as others!”

Ainz couldn't be faulted for using underhanded means if it came to this. He cleared his throat and shifted his tone to sound more serious.

“—Shihoutu Tokitu”

“HAH!”

“I am saying that I want to see what this place usually looks like. If you have been diligent with your duties, you wouldn't have to do anything special now, correct? Or, are you trying to show me something different from usual because you have something to hide?”

Shihoutu Tokitu gulped and made an expression that was filled with resolve (or that's what it looked like to Ainz).

“A word please, Ainz-sama! This Shihoutu Tokitu, who had been entrusted with this place by the Supreme Being Amanomahitotsu, never did a single thing that would cause him shame!”

“Of course.”

Shihoutu Tokitu looked puzzled at Ainz's instant reply.

“Even though I have only interacted with you for a short while, I can see that you are devoted to your work and are truly loyal to the ones you call Supreme Beings. My words just now were quite thoughtless. I take them back and offer my apologies.”

Ainz bowed his head.

“Ooo! Ainz-sama! Please don't do that! A Supreme Being such as you bowing to me! Please lift your noble face!”

Ainz slowly raised his head and looked straight at Shihoutu Tokitu.

“Shihoutu Tokitu. I am glad that you accepted my apology. But I want you to know and understand. I just want to have a look at how you and this place are normally whilst holding a relaxed conversation. Just treat me like a normal guest.”

Shihoutu Tokitu grumbled a bit, but he seemingly came to a compromise internally and nodded.

“Understood.”

“Is that so, that's great. A day may come when we will invite VIPs—important people from other places—to Nazarick. You may display your full talent at that time, I will be relying on you then.”

“HAH! —b-but something like bowing to the likes of me...”

“My regret at deriding you was a large part of the reason why I did that, but you may also consider it as my apology to the Amanoma-san who trusted in you and entrusted you with this place.”

Shihoutu Tokitu made a bitter smile, an expression of defeat at the face of such an explanation. But, he immediately returned to his work face. Of course, all of the above was just what it looked like from Ainz’s point of view.

“—In that case, Ainz-sama, I will take my leave to work on the order.”

Ainz watched Shihoutu Tokitu’s back as he left and raised his voice a bit so that it would reach everyone in the cafeteria.

“Sorry for the disturbance everyone. Well then, please continue dining without worry.”

Aura and the others returned to the table, as if they were replacing Shihoutu Tokitu. At a few of the tables here and there, the maids started eating again. It felt like the atmosphere was less tense now. It looked like the incident with Shihoutu Tokitu helped relieve some of the tension.

Aura and the others each held their preferred drinks while Lumière placed Ainz’s coffee in front of him.

He could smell the coffee’s rich fragrance, a mysterious smell with hints of some kind of berry in it.

YGGDRASIL never had any cross promotions with brands but it had a lot of content in it including foodstuffs. Normal games would probably stop at a simple [Coffee-bean] but YGGDRASIL had multiple varieties of them. Each of them was also graded differently with the ones at the highest grade bringing out the best effects from the food.

Therefore, the beans in Nazarick’s inventory were of a good grade and this coffee should certainly be tasty.

This is probably what quality coffee smells like. Would it also taste like berries?

While feeling sad that his body was unable to taste it, Ainz waited until everyone took their seats to speak.

“Well, let’s talk while enjoying our drinks.”

Two of the elves had melon soda while the other one had green tea with ice in it. Following Ainz’s words, they took a sip. The melon soda group blinked in surprise, pressing their hands to their mouths. Their reaction was certainly not a bad one.

“Wow, so tasty.”

“Sweet.”

The two who whispered those words quickly emptied their glasses. Ainz was counting on this to happen. He spoke gently to them, “—How about a refill?”

“Ah, yes, please let us do so.”

The two elves immediately nodded and headed over to the drinks section. There was a spring in their steps.

“It’s good that they liked it.”

“Ah, yes.”

Ainz spoke to the remaining elf. She was probably also interested in their drinks, as she quickly finished her tea and stood up. By the way, both of the twins went with cola and from their expressions, it looked like it was nothing special for them.

Many unexpected things had happened on the way, but it looked like the elves had mostly calmed down. They no longer seemed like they would doubt everything he said just because he was an undead.

As expected, sweet things are effective. There are no women who would hate sweet things. A woman who can resist sweet things simply does not exist...So Mocchimochi-san’s was correct all along. I thought it was just an excuse for her reckless eating habits...

The other two female members of Ainz Ooal Gown had tilted their heads at that statement—although slimes didn’t have necks—but it was not like they denied it either. With the way the elves acted just now, that counted as two things that could probably serve as proof she was not exactly wrong. Well, he still had his suspicions.

Now, at last. I have gone through a lot of simulations in my mind, but I wonder if I can get a discussion about the Elven country going smoothly...

He remembered what they heard from the elves when they met the first time.

There was no name for the country of elves that was said to be in the great forest of the south. Albedo surmised that it was because they never had the need to open diplomatic relations with other races, the other nations were far away from it in the first place. As they had no need to identify their land as something separate from the rest, just calling it a country was enough for them.

However, it seemed like after being ruled for so long by a king, it was being called a kingdom. This king was supposedly super strong. What his strengths and classes were was something they did not manage to find out. At that point, the elves looked at the twins, probably wondering why they did not know about this.

This country of elves was embroiled in hostilities with the Theocracy at the present moment and these elves were sold as slaves after they were captured by

the Theocracy. What the war was for and when did it start were questions to which these elves had no answers for.

It was probably because this country of elves did not have a standardized education system. These elves also did not have any interest in learning about such matters. Although after hearing what they said, it seemed like they were at least instructed on more important skills and knowledge (mostly consisting of stuff about monsters). Maybe they felt that history and similar subjects were not useful enough to be taught.

When asked about the dark elves in their country, they replied that although they had never seen them, they do exist. In fact, Aura and Mare were the first dark elves they had ever met. Dark elves are likely a minority in the Elven country, but it didn't seem like they were persecuted according to these elves. That said, considering the lack of knowledge these elves demonstrated, it was entirely possible that they just didn't know about it. And—that was all of it.

That was all the information Ainz managed to get out of them at that time.

He had to be satisfied with such meager information just so that they wouldn't get suspicious. But he had a great excuse for being proactive in asking them now. Patience is a virtue, as the saying goes.

Well, I should make a decision first. Should I make the topic about wanting to open diplomatic relations between our nations? Or how about saying that I want to go to a dark elf village to find friends for Aura and Mare?

They would be on guard if the conversation was about something on national-level relations. It was easier to make them talk if it was a reason that a normal person could sympathize with. Moreover, Ainz need not lie as he was really aiming for the second reason, so it would be easier for him. Ainz was a person who could lie as much as he wanted to but that didn't mean he liked to do so. It was just that he wouldn't hesitate to lie if there was some benefit to be had.

It was also better not to lie in case they somehow managed to figure out the truth later.

That should be the easier way...but I can't imagine how it would turn out if I bring reason up in front of Aura and Mare

He was afraid they would feel duty-bound to make friends. In his honest opinion, friendship was something that was formed gradually with people with similar hobbies. He wouldn't call it friendship when someone was ordered to do it. Ainz remembered his friends from YGGDRASIL—his former guildmates. Those comrades he made from chance meetings and through fate's

machinations.

It was just that he didn't know if children needed to make friends or not. Ainz...Suzuki Satoru didn't have any during his childhood and that didn't cause any problems for him in his opinion.

Being that kind of person, the fact that Ainz was even thinking about things like making friends was because Yamaiko used to say something to that effect long ago. At the same time, he also remembered Ulbert responding with, "that's the pipe dream of people who live in a different world than us", sarcastically laughing at her words.

Ainz didn't know who was in the right here. In any case, there was nothing to lose by having friends.

In that case, how about I stop thinking about it in terms of them making friends and tell them it's about making dark elf acquaintances? Whether they become friends or not will be up to them. Of course, it's all the better if they manage to make some

With that said, if there was an extreme difference in power and standing between two parties, wouldn't it be a hindrance to the development of friendships? Everyone was equal in YGGDRASIL.

—Ainz frowned a bit as some of his friends came to mind suddenly, but he immediately shook his head, clearing away those memories.

They probably wouldn't have become friends if they had met in the real world with its inequalities. With that thought in mind, the first step should be to approach the dark elves in the Elven country on equal terms as much as possible. Dark elves from the Sorcerer Kingdom's top echelon and dark elves that are a minority in the Elven country wouldn't make for a good match at all.

Apart from trying to conceal our status as much as possible...umm. Do all fathers around the world have to think about these things this much? I wonder how Touch-me san did it, maybe I should have asked him for more details.

While Ainz was worrying about the soon-to-be-had conversation, the elves returned back to their seats. All of them went with cola.

Oh no, I didn't get my thoughts straight yet... I should not ad-lib everything.

But, there was no time left. As long as the twins were here, he could only say that this was about opening diplomatic relations. If things wouldn't go smoothly, he could just bring up the idea about making friends as a side topic. Or, maybe he could spin it as his wish to deepen relationships with the dark elves as a part of micro-level diplomacy.

"Well then—let's proceed to the main topic."

The elves who were guzzling their drinks like it was the last drink of their life, suddenly stopped.

“We have established a nation named the Sorcerer Kingdom at present. The plan is to have various races live in coexistence. Some humans, dwarves, goblins, orcs, and lizardmen have already become citizens of our nation. Leaving aside whether or not the Elves would approve of this, I want to initiate diplomatic relations with the Elven nation as well as trade relations. As such, I wish to visit your nation. Won’t you cooperate with us?”

Even though it was just an excuse right now, it was not bad to have diplomatic and trade relations with the Elven country. However, there was a critical problem.

Ainz cannot be the emissary for this matter.

Conferring with the foreign affairs of another country and making a treaty to open diplomatic relations was something out of Ainz’s capabilities. Although it went smoothly with the dwarves, he doubted that he would succeed in the same way again. Rather, it was more likely to end up the opposite of what he intended.

Therefore, he wanted to send wise people in his stead if they were to engage in diplomacy. Albedo was the best choice for this, but he didn’t want to assign her any additional work as she would be busy for a while managing the occupied territories of the Kingdom.

She would probably say “it’s fine” if he ordered her, and she would probably be right. But, that would mean she would have to overstretch herself to make it work, so Ainz needed to keep his subordinates’ mental health in mind to not overwork them.

Ainz would have been extremely happy if they just made this conversation just about making personal acquaintances with the Dark Elves instead of making it about something so important.

“Eh, Ah, Ainz Ooal Gown-sama? What exactly does this cooperation entail?”

Ainz shrugged slightly at her cautious response.

“First, I want to hear some details from you. Also, just ‘Ainz’ is fine, you know?”

“We will be at your service if it’s something we know-” the elf replied with a determined look, “b-but please forgive us for not being able to address you so...”

Aura, Mare, and the maids around them who were secretly eavesdropping had perplexed expressions.

If elves called him Ainz, then they would be told that they were being “over-familiar” and should “understand their position.” But, if they did not, they would

be told, “how dare they refuse Ainz-sama’s order.” They were probably feeling conflicted because they knew that they would react in that exact way.

He didn’t intend to scold the maids listening in. It’s not like they were doing it out of malice or simple curiosity. He felt they would go “me, me” to be on call if he needed them during this conversation.

“...Is that so, that’s regrettable. So, returning to the topic at hand... How is the Elven country? How do you deal with monsters seeing that you live in the forests?”

The elves had confused expressions, as if they were just asked a weird question.

“While we live in the forest, our homes are on the top of trees, because it’s dangerous on the ground.”

“We make our homes by transforming trees using druid magic.”

“The trees suitable for such magic are also grown by magic. We call them Elf Trees.”

From what they said, it seemed like the Elves could change the shape of trees using druid magic. Like creating cavities inside the trees or shaping bridges between trees. An Elf village was just a place where tens of those structures were bunched up together.

This method of making things out of Elf Trees seemed to be at the core of Elven culture. Not just homes or furniture, they could also create weapons and armor out of it. It was possible to make the arrows they used for hunting to be as hard as iron.

Ainz wanted them to demonstrate this magic as it did not exist in YGGDRASIL. They were surprised at that request because from their point of view, the tree the twins lived in was an example right there. It looked like they thought it was a mutated Elf Tree (because it looked different) that could only be transformed by those two.

Furthermore, as that magic can only be used on Elf Trees, it didn’t work with other trees. Because the Elves lived in such conditions, monsters that were good at climbing trees like snakes or spiders were their natural enemies. Although they had things like a nightwatch, those monsters also tended to be good at concealment; there were still victims every now and then. On the other hand, they did not get attacked as much by monsters that couldn’t climb because it was easier to fight them off.

It seemed like the Elven capital (the only place the Elves could call a city as they were not a populous race) was the only settlement that was constructed in

a place without the forest's cover, on the shore of a crescent-shaped lake. The "seemed like" was added because these elves never visited the capital and only heard about it from others.

They could establish that city on a plain because there was a giant monster in the lake that captured and ate any large monsters that came nearby.

I see... Ainz thought.

As druid magic could also provide water, living on the trees was advantageous for them. As for flying monsters, the canopy of the Elf Trees could act as a shield while also hiding them.

Living in such circumstances, it was natural that most of the Elves gain abilities as rangers or druids. In other words, they could not survive without developing such abilities.

I don't know how class selection works in this world, but seems like without jobs like farmers among them, the Elves are more likely to be better fighters than humans

He continued, asking them about the lifespans and population of the Elves.

They were evidently not that concerned about how long they lived, seeing as they did not know their own lifespans. It seemed like the oldest person there was thought to be over 300 years old. By the way, these elves didn't even know their own age. It was likely that they did not have the concept of a birthday.

Perhaps it was due to their long lives, they did not give birth frequently like humans and thus their populations were much smaller. However, upon learning more, Ainz thought that the number of children they had was not small at all.

In YGGDRASIL's setting, an elf's lifespan was a thousand years...they age up quickly in the first 10 years and then in the last 10 years, I think? I don't remember the exact details, but I think it's something like that. Or am I wrong? Also, if they supposedly gave birth once every decade... if we consider 200 years old as the start of adulthood and 400 years old to be when infertility sets in...20 children? I want to learn more details about this in the future.

"Then—If I were to return you to your former village, where would I go?"

Elves started looking at each other.

I see, of course they will not talk about it. It's important information after all.

After a while, one of the elves inquired hesitantly.

"E-excuse me... But are we going to be sent back to our homes?"

"...mm?"

Noticing their strange choice of words, Ainz realized his mistake. "...That's right. I forgot that your village was attacked by the Theocracy."

These elves were not soldiers, just people who were living in the village that were captured during the Theocracy's attack on it. From their point of view, it was painful to return back to that place. Plus, their safety could not be guaranteed.

"Let's do this. Instead of returning you to your village, we'll take you to a safe place. Do you have any such place in mind? A village with your relatives or if there aren't any, how about the capital?"

"The capital..."

"Please forgive us. We don't know any other place except the surroundings of our village..."

"I wonder which place can be considered a safe place..."

These elves were unfamiliar with information outside of their village, but that wasn't something limited to these girls. It's the same for the villagers from the Kingdom or the Empire.

People in this world mostly live out their entire lives at their place of birth, especially for those without education. Though they would barely know about their neighboring cities, the other cities in their country might as well be foreign lands to them.

While Ainz was pondering over this, the elves spoke again.

"Excuse us...but are we really going to be sent back outside?"

"That's what I planned to do. If we are to engage in diplomacy with the Elven country, keeping you here would make the other side dissatisfied. You understand, don't you? I kept you here until now as an emergency measure, but it will be hard to continue doing so. However, I am not cruel enough to release you in a land under the control of the Slaine Theocracy. That's why I asked you for a safe location—"

Although Ainz did not intend to be the emissary, returning these three back safely would probably help with future diplomacy.

Seeing that the elves wanted to say something, Ainz asked them, "what's the matter?"

"Is it possible to let us continue staying here?"

"...hmmmm."

Ainz moved his gaze to the drinks in front of the elves. There was no way that was the reason right?

"...why? ...I can understand if you don't want to tell me, but please do if possible."

“About that—”

The elf representing them took a quick look at the twins.

“...Aura, Mare. It looks like your drinks are nearly finished. Why don't you go and get some more?”

“Eh!?”

“Okay! Understood Ainz-sama—Let's go Mare.”

Splendid.

Ainz admired Aura's quick wit.

If he was in Aura's place, he wouldn't have understood so quickly that he was being told indirectly to get away for a while. Or perhaps his “working adult senses” would have instantly understood it.

One could stand to reason that Aura was better than Albedo or Demiurge at reading the mood. Ainz could imagine Demiurge with a grin saying, “so that's what it is, Ainz-sama”.

Those two would completely misunderstand my intentions...to the point where I sometimes doubt if they are doing it intentionally. Or are they really doing it intentionally?

“Eh, eh?”

Aura dragged away the still puzzled Mare by his arms. Ainz spoke after they were distant enough, “can you say it now?”

“Y-yes.”

The elf replied, after confirming that the twins are far enough from them with a quick glance. A Dark Elf's sense of hearing was better than a human's and rangers like Aura were even better at it. The elf before him was probably whispering with that in mind, but it was highly likely that Aura could still hear them.

“We are already used to our life here, and we cannot return to that life again... This place...Aura-sama and Mare-sama's house is the best.”

“Eh?”

Ainz initially lowered his volume to match the elf's, but he let out his usual voice at the sudden surprise.

He thought that they were joking for a moment, but after he saw the other two nodding seriously he understood that was their true sentiment.

First, it seemed like the food quality in Nazarick was on a different level. Elves normally ate fruits, meats, and vegetables by either roasting or boiling them. The amount of passion Nazarick puts into its food was completely different.

The elves said with certainty that they were not confident they could ever adjust to their former lives after getting used to the food here. By the way, pizza seemed to be their favorite.

I see... Culinary diplomacy does not seem like such a bad idea. Being able to access such fine cuisine should be a point of appeal. ...are they dwarves or what!

The elves also had other reasons.

The level of safety here was also completely different. Even if they lived in a moderately safe place like a village created by druid magic, it was impossible for a year to pass without any casualties occurring due to monsters. In contrast, one could sleep peacefully in Nazarick even without having someone to guard the night.

They had a lot to say, but if it was something like this, there was no need to get the twins away from here. As Ainz wondered if there were more reasons, she added, “and being able to serve those two is a joy.”

“...aah,” Ainz nodded empathetically.

Those two were of a similar race to the elves and were cute children to boot. They probably had doubts about serving children, but Aura’s and Mare’s personalities had likely won them over.

Even Ainz would select the twins if he was asked which of the Floor Guardians he would like to serve. No, if someone did ask him, he would probably say something like, “I can’t choose because everyone is wonderful”. But if he was being honest, it would be those two. Next in line might be Cocytus. He really didn’t want to serve the others.

Still, he thought this was something that could be said in the twins’ presence. Although he thought that they had something else to say, it seemed like this was the end of their talk.

Honestly, I don’t understand at all. Wasn’t it fine for the twins to hear this? Was there something in the previous conversation that would get them reprimanded by the twins? ...well, whatever

“Very well. Then I want you to continue working in Nazarick as you have done until now.”

There was no reason to refuse their wish.

The elves looked happy upon hearing Ainz’s response. It didn’t seem like they were putting on an act to flatter Ainz. “Although, if we are talking about employing you formally, we will need to discuss salary and welfare first. I will order someone to look into it.”

It appeared that the elves did not understand what Ainz was talking about, but this was an important issue to him.

How these elves were to be treated would become an important factor when they establish friendly relations with the Dark Elves in the Elven country. They could say that after freeing the elves from slavery and looking after the elves, the elves were just paying back what they had received. But, there was a limit to such excuses. Their present situation of uncompensated labor mirrored the practices of a black company. He did not want the Dark Elves that might visit here in the future to get such an impression.

In that case, he just had to use these three to set Nazarick's precedent as a white company.

Ainz took a quick glance at the maids around them.

They were cupping their hands behind their ears as if to hear them better while trying to make it look like they were resting their chins in their palms.

They were not at all concerned about their appearances.

He didn't feel like reproaching them since he thought that it was just a display of their loyalty, but he at least wanted them to hide it a little better.

I should make a contract with these elves as soon as possible. Also, should I try extending the white company treatment from these elves to the regular maids?

He could try, but he was afraid that the maids who just wanted to work more would direct their ire at the elves who were the cause for the increase in their leisure time. Of course, he didn't think they would go as far as killing the elves, but he needed to be careful if he decided to extend the treatment to the maids.

"...Leaving that aside, I want to borrow your help in our excursion to the Elven country. I want you to act as guides, if possible. Of course, Aura and Mare will also come with us. It's just that we're not familiar with Elven etiquette so it would help if you were to act as our intermediaries."

The elves looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Forgive us, but we don't have confidence in acting as guides. As for being intermediaries...although we have traveled around our village, we are also not sure about things like etiquette..."

"Is that so..."

"Sorry!"

"Ah, you don't need to bow."

It would be bothersome to visit an unknown place without a guide, but it was not like he was sure these elves could be of use. If he was going into the unknown

anyway, it would be better to not force them to come along. They might even end up becoming a burden.

Ainz turned around and beckoned Lumière over. After she brought her face closer to him, Ainz whispered “just a bit more” and lifted his cup. Of course, the contents of the cup were not touched at all. Just to be sure, he gestured in the twins’ direction with his eyes.

He thought he was being a bit obtuse but it seemed like she quickly understood and left with a simple “excuse me”.

“And—what is the general opinion on Dark Elves among you Elves?”

“They are splendid beings.”

Ainz wrinkled his brows at the instant, somewhat suspicious response.

He would be happy if that was how dark elves were thought of but their answer felt off.

Ainz could immediately think of the reason why. It was about Aura and Mare.

“—No, that’s not it. I am asking about the relations between the Dark Elf race and your race of the Elves.”

“They are splendid beings.”

“That’s not...”

He probably couldn’t do anything about this kind of kowtowing. After being treated as subordinates of the twins’ for so long, they couldn’t possibly say something like, “Dark Elves are an inferior race after all.” Rather, it would be scarier if they were the kind of people who could say something like that.

“As I have mentioned before, I want to open diplomatic relations with the Elf country. I also want to entrust this to the twins. That’s why I want to know how Elves as a whole look at Dark Elves. I don’t want them to be mistreated if Elven society holds negative opinions of Dark Elves. So what do you think? I need an honest answer.”

The elves looked at each other.

“Honestly, as our village did not have any dark elves, we’ve only met them here for the first time. That’s why we didn’t have any opinions about them. The most we know was that they migrated from the north to the great forest.”

“We’ve heard of their dark skins from hearsay and were surprised to see that was true.”

“I don’t remember the villagers saying anything bad about the Dark Elves, but I would ask you to keep in mind that this is only about our village.”

It looked like they were no longer trying to flatter him or tell any lies. So the

younger (maybe calling them young was stretching it a bit) Elves didn't have any bad opinions against Dark Elves.

Even though they were a minority, it looked like they weren't being persecuted. Perhaps it was because the Elves didn't have the leeway for such things when they were being threatened by an external force—the Theocracy. Or perhaps the forest was just that much of a difficult place to live in.

“...by the way what about the undead?”

“Enemies that sully the forest.”

“Disgusting beings.”

“We rarely encounter any though.”

“Ah, yes.”

Immediate answers.

While Ainz wondered why they weren't taking into consideration the feelings of the twins' master, he couldn't say that out loud.

He certainly asked them to speak honestly just now, but this was too honest. These girls were the type who would get fired because they truly believed in the CEO's words when they were told to be informal.

Still, with that established, he was now certain that he could not be the emissary. Maybe this was for the best. He could use this as an excuse to not be the emissary. It was certainly not because Ainz wasn't talented enough.

Or should he take the steps in proper order—dispatch diplomats, start diplomatic relations, and then head over to the Elven country.

But we don't have such diplomats. ...The fact that we can't trust the human officials in charge of internal affairs is a weak point... Or maybe there are some and I just don't know about it. In that case, how about asking Albedo to dispatch adventurers? No...that system isn't stable enough yet to send them out to represent the nation...or maybe I am wrong. After all, it's me we're talking about.

If he informed Albedo about this, she would probably say that the adventurers would work just fine. But—

—the critical issue here is the lack of time.

Due to the hostilities with the Theocracy, the Elven country was pretty much pushed into a corner. This had been the case since before these elves were captured. If things went badly, it was entirely possible that the Elven country would be destroyed soon.

The collapse of the Elven country was not a setback for Ainz, because they would be far more effective in establishing diplomatic relations if the Sorcerer

Kingdom could extend their help in that scenario. So, would it be better if they just waited for the collapse? That was not the case.

They didn't have the luxury of watching the situation from the sidelines, especially because he highly valued the rarity of the Dark Elf lives.

Maybe I should just send the two of them ahead—no, I can't do that. I don't feel comfortable sending them alone into an unknown place. Although I understand that they are level 100 NPCs and are not children...we should just ignore the stuff on international relations and concentrate on getting them friends. I should also go with them just as I have planned

He had no plans to join in the war with the Theocracy and save the Elven country at this point in time. Ainz didn't want to turn the Theocracy into the Sorcerer Kingdom's enemy due to his independent action.

He wanted to know Albedo and Demiurge's thoughts on this matter, but he feared that they might find out his skull was empty if he did that. If Ainz couldn't manage the conversation, his idiotic utterances might end up being taken seriously and cause damage to Nazarick in the future.

It's not a bad idea to tell them to evacuate just the dark elves after visiting the Elven country. In that case...is there a need to take someone along other than the twins?

It was better to take stealthy guards like Hanzos along instead of leading something like an army in case he did decide to take someone along.

Like that time in the Dwarf Kingdom.

"I see..."

Ainz stared at the three elves. They would be in that lizardman's position this time.

"I-is something the matter?"

"Nothing, I am just talking to myself."

He could take one among the three with him, leaving the other two here. As long as he held them hostage, the lone elf probably wouldn't do anything that would be negative to Ainz.

Not bad at all.

Even if they understood that they were being held hostage, he could insist that was not the case.

Ainz looked over to the twins. They immediately understood his intentions. Aura, Mare, and Lumière returned to the table.

"By the way, what kind of gifts would make Elves happy? Things like gold and gemstones?"

“We don’t use metal currency so I don’t think gold would work...”

“I think our village would be most happy about the food and maybe rare herbs. Minor scrapes and such can be healed by magic but poison and disease need a talented druid to cure them. So portable herbs are highly valued.”

“Not clothes, since we also make them from Elf Trees”

“Homes, arrows...and even clothes. Looks like Elven druid magic is very convenient. You can’t do that, right Mare? “

“Eh? Ah, y-yes. I can’t use such magic.”

Perhaps this peculiar brand of druid magic itself was a mark of Elven progress. He wanted those techniques if possible, but Nazarick’s residents probably wouldn’t be able to use them. This reaffirms the fact that making the residents of this world prostrate before Nazarick and bringing them under its reign would be the main factor that could tip the scales of victory in a hypothetical guild war.

But—

I should assume there were guilds—those who were teleported in the past—who already did this. I should tell this to Albedo and have her look into rethinking our national strategy on war.

It stood to reason that if someone like Ainz could think of this, other Players could as well. Only idiots would think of themselves as someone special.

Maybe it will be a good idea to transport large amounts of food through [Gate] upon reaching the Elven villages to make them more friendly to the Sorcerer Kingdom.

He remembered it being effective in the Dwarf Kingdom. Things would go smoothly if he could just remember his experiences in the Dwarf Kingdom and build on them.

I also felt like wanting to run away then too, didn’t I...

“...the best way to do this is to first find the crescent lake, visit the royal capital that was said to be on its shore to collect information, and then head to Dark Elves’ village.”

“We are going to a Dark Elf village?”

Aura looked like she wanted to say something, but she probably couldn’t ask in detail in front of the three elves.

If possible, Ainz didn’t want to tell them they were visiting the Dark Elves’ village to find them friends. He didn’t want them to make friends just because he ordered them to.

“That’s right. That’s what I intend to do. I am going to need your help there.”

He deliberately ignored Aura's behavior, but he still got a pair of energetic affirmations in return.

What should I do next...persuade the others? I can't make the same excuse I used for the dwarven expedition...

He wasn't confident about the next step, but he had to succeed here because he also wanted to use this as the groundwork to bring the concept of paid vacations to Nazarick.

At that point—maybe they were waiting for the conversation to die down—the dishes were brought over.

“Well, enjoy yourselves.”

With Ainz encouraging them, the elves took to the food with relish.

3

What would a person do when faced with a challenge?

There were many methods suitable for overcoming one and this time Ainz chose to use the advantage of numbers and location.

With Aura and Mare flanking him, Ainz sat down on the throne in the audience hall prepared by the guardians, finally holding the original Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown after a long time.

The ultimate form of the absolute ruler of Nazarick and the guild leader Ainz Ooal Gown, so to speak.

Still, his victory against the opponent that would be appearing soon was not a certain thing. The opponent was the true last boss. A boss more fearsome than something like the Devourer of the Nine Worlds, Ainz thought as he gulped with his non-existent throat.

He had already gone through the simulations multiple times, but Ainz was just an ordinary person. He likely doesn't even reach the foot of the mountain that was his opponent's intellect.

So—

There's nothing else to do...except leaving it all to luck!!

He was placing his hopes on his ad-lib skills. He was sure his future self would pull through.

Lumière, who had been waiting before the entrance, announced the opponent's arrival.

“—very well. Let them enter”

“Understood, Ainz-sama.”

Everyone should have understood who the opponent was by now.

It was none other than the last boss AKA Guardian Overseer, Albedo.

The moment she noticed Ainz, Albedo switched from her usual smiling face to a serious expression.

“Please forgive me for making you wait.”

Seeing Albedo bowing deeply near the entrance, Ainz ordered her to lift her head up.

“Don’t worry about it, Albedo. I was already informed that you would be late. So you can even say that you are on time.”

When contacted through [Message] beforehand, Albedo informed him that because she was doing something in the Frozen Prison, her appearance might not be suitable for an audience. So, she requested some time to make herself presentable.

With no reason to refuse her request, Ainz designated this time (30 minutes more than what Albedo requested) to meet him here. The fact that Albedo still arrived ten minutes before the designated time was likely due to her personality. Or maybe it was just an iron-clad rule for working adults to always arrive before time.

Albedo lifted her head, walked before the throne, and kneeled.

Ainz informed her immediately.

“Albedo. I am taking a paid vacation starting right this moment”

He could make any number of excuses, but every time he did that, the conversation tended to go in weird directions. So he felt it was better to directly state his goal here. Demiurge was absent this time, so it is unlikely to lead to some strange development.

Albedo scrunched up her brows slightly while lifting her head up to look at Ainz. She then cast her gaze to the left and right of him, probably checking Aura and Mare’s reactions to those words.

Ainz continued to observe Albedo, worried about her reaction. She replied with a serious expression.

“Including Nazarick, everything in the Sorcerer Kingdom belongs to Ainz-sama.”

—*what?*

He couldn’t understand what she was saying at all.

No, not one bit.

How could one arrive at such a response?

What leaps of logic, what train of thought would lead one to such a conclusion?

How should Ainz respond?

He could immediately think of two replies.

“What the hell are you saying?” was one, the other was *“Yes, just as you have surmised.”* Of course, he would apply a coat of varnish over those words to make them sound regal.

Ainz started churning his imaginary brain matter at full power, but there wasn't enough time. Albedo had already thrown the ball into his court, he needed to send it back as soon as possible.

“...It seems like you are misunderstanding something, Albedo. That's not what I am trying to say.”

He decided to be honest. Would it have been better if he put on an act like he usually did?

—yeah, probably.

Anyhow, he managed to protect the image of Ainz Ooal Gown, the absolute ruler of Nazarick, for now.

...By sacrificing Suzuki Satoru's heart.

Albedo made an expression like she realized something.

“P-please forgive me for my mistake, Ainz-sama.”

She bowed again in panic.

“No, it's not like I am angry. You don't need to bow.”

Only scum would enjoy having someone bow their heads for no fault of their own.

“It seems like the term ‘paid vacation’ caused a misunderstanding.”

Nazarick did not have salaries or day-offs. It stood at the pinnacle of black companies. Therefore, it was highly likely that she thought the term “paid vacation” was a metaphor for something else. You could say this was Ainz's fault because he had yet to implement such a system in Nazarick. Of course, Ainz would want to vindicate himself by pointing at the NPCs' obstinance and demand for more work.

The following was just Suzuki Satoru's personal experience, but however bad a company might get, employees could usually tolerate a lot as long as their interpersonal relationships were good. On the other hand, if these relationships were bad, it wouldn't matter how well the company might treat their employees; they tended to break down quickly.

Perhaps Nazarick was running smoothly because the interpersonal relationships between its denizens were great.

“It was a mistake on my part. Forgive me.”

Ainz lowered his head as well.

“A-Ainz-sama! Please raise your head!”

Ainz lifted his head at Albedo’s flustered words.

“...Anyhow, as we have both bowed, can I be considered forgiven?”

“There’s no need for Ainz-sama to...”

“—If there comes a day when I can’t bow to you people, then that day will be the end of me. That person will no longer be me.”

Albedo gasped with her eyes wide open and then bowed deeply.

The disturbance by Ainz’s side was likely caused by the twins’ surprise at Albedo’s reaction.

Before Ainz could ask her what the matter was, Albedo lifted her head.

“Ainz-sama said that it’s a paid vacation, but is there a plan to head somewhere with the two of them in tow?”

As expected of Albedo.

To have noticed that Ainz was planning to travel just from the phrase “paid vacation,” Albedo was quite fearsome. If it was Ainz in her shoes, he would have probably said something like, “as the two of them are here, are you planning to spend some leisure time on the Sixth Floor?”

“I am planning to head to the Elven country in the south with these two.”

“So it’s the Elven country...” Albedo pondered for a while before speaking again, “I see...”

What do you see?

Maybe she was thinking that Ainz was heading over there for diplomacy. He had to make sure.

“...don’t be hasty. I am not going there for diplomatic reasons. I just want to observe their state of affairs.”

“Understood.”

A simple reply. Ainz thought she was going to say more...

This was way scarier. He had the feeling that a critical misunderstanding was taking root.

“...So I will be going on a journey to the Elven country with these two. If there’s something urgent, contact me with [Message]. I will be back immediately...that’s all there is, alright? I don’t plan on doing anything else, okay? I really, really don’t. Understood?”

“Understood. So will you be setting out soon?”

“Y-yes, That’s right” He hadn’t thought that far ahead, but considering the

Theocracy's advances, it would be better for them if they started early. "I intend to, but Aura and Mare have to prepare right?"

"I think those two will have no issues. If Ainz-sama decided to set out this instant, then it would be natural for them to complete their preparations immediately."

Ainz wanted to reproach her for saying such things, but the twins also concurred with her.

"Mmmmm—"

If those two were saying that it's not a problem then it was not Ainz's place to object.

"—I want to be certain about something. Not just Albedo, but Aura and Mare as well. I have a question for all of you. The Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick established the Sorcerer Kingdom, made the Empire its vassal, extended its control over the demihumans of the wildlands, and had just recently destroyed the Re-Estize Kingdom. You could say the size of the organization grew following the expansion of its territory. Well then— I have some apprehensions. Our organization has expanded, but do we have a corresponding expansion in personnel?"

An organization wasn't something that would stop working just because a person or two were taking a rest.

Aura and Mare were certainly part of the top brass. If we were to consider Nazarick as a company, they would be its executives. Normal employees could let their peers substitute for them, but executives did not have that luxury. As such, it would be bad if the organization ground to a halt just because the two of them took a rest.

In that case, the plan had to be put on hold and perhaps altered.

"—I am worried about that. We might need to take some drastic measures if that's the case."

"I don't think there will be any problems. And, if it came down to it, there's always me and Demiurge. If we also have Pandora's Actor's cooperation, there will be no issues at all."

"I see. As expected of Albedo. So there's already a solution in place for my misgivings. Splendid work, worthy of being the mo- one of the most intelligent beings in the Nazarick and the holder of the title of Guardian Overseer. Absolutely brilliant. I am highly impressed."

He praised Albedo with all his heart.

Unlike Ainz, she was diligently managing the organization. If she did not deserve such praise then no one did.

“—I am sincerely grateful for your kind words.”

Albedo regained her posture after a deep bow, but her expression was a little stiff.

Another question popped into Ainz’s head as this happened.

“It’s Aura and Mare this time...but would everything work without issues if you and Demiurge were the ones to take a vacation?”

Albedo faltered for a bit but immediately answered.

“I believe that even if we were to be absent, the others would be able to substitute for us without issues. They would do their best to meet Ainz-sama’s expectations.”

“Ummm...Albedo. It’s not about what you believe. What I want to know is whether or not they could handle it without a problem...of course, it is hard for you to express doubt about the abilities of the Floor Guardians—your comrades, and I do understand that it’s painful for you. But, can you tell me if they can do it, without your emotions getting in the way? If the answer is that they cannot, then we will have to train them and restructure the organization when we have the leeway to do it. Well...if even someone like me could foresee this, Albedo has probably already looked into it.”

“E-excuse me, Ainz-sama...sorry for interrupting...but.”

“What’s the matter, Mare”

“Eh, umm, s-sorry but, I am n-not confident about being able to do the amazing work that Albedo-san does...”

After a short silence, Albedo’s prickly voice echoed in the hall.

“—Is that all you have to say?”

What is this?

He didn’t feel like any of Mare’s words just now warrants Albedo’s anger. In fact, Ainz was in complete agreement with him.

“Mare!”

Mare flinched as Albedo shouted. She was seriously angry.

Before Ainz could stop her, Albedo continued. “Did I hear a Floor Guardian, an elite among elites, say that he can’t do the work that’s expected of him by a Supreme Being?”

“Albedo!—Don’t be so loud. What’s the problem with someone saying that they cannot do something when that’s the truth? In fact, it would be more of a

problem if they say that they can, even when they cannot”

“Forgive me for my insolence, but let me continue.”

Despite Ainz’s reprimand, Albedo continued in an even louder voice. But, as it seemed like she was no longer directing her anger at Mare, Ainz let her continue.

“There’s no problem with someone saying that they can’t do something, but they should also suggest how they could work towards being able to do it! A Floor Guardian cannot be permitted to say that they are unable to do something a Supreme Being expected of them and end their words with that.”

Guh, Ainz groaned inside.

He couldn’t say that Albedo was wrong. What Mare said was certainly not good from that point of view.

“...Ainz-sama, I think Albedo is right. Mare should retract his words.”

Aura said coldly. Being scolded by his own sister, Mare let out some pitiable sounds.

“As a Floor Guardian—”

“Stop!” Ainz shouted angrily to stop Albedo from continuing on. Of course, it was just an act, he was not really angry. The fact that his emotional suppression did not kick in was proof of that.

Ainz released his aura along with his voice. He had just used the aura’s visual effect to take control of the conversation, not to debuff others. He chose to use it because he knew Aura, Mare, Albedo, and even Lumière were equipped with items that granted immunity against mental status effects.

He didn’t know what Albedo would have said if he let her continue. Maybe she would have gently explained it to Mare later, but as long as there was a chance that it could result in their relationship breaking down, Ainz could not stand aside.

“Mare. What Albedo said is reasonable. If you express your inability to do something you should also suggest ways to remedy it.”

“P-please forgive me.”

“Be that as it may, Albedo. Don’t you think there is a problem with a superior who forces their subordinates into doing something they are unable to?”

“...I cannot say there are no problems”

“I think both of you were at fault this time. I am glad for your loyalty, but anyone could make a mistake. You have to be gentle in correcting them the first time around so that they won’t hide their mistakes or repeat them.”

Honestly, Albedo was just too loyal and too able, so she tended to be hard on

others. He thought the only reason it didn't cause any major problems up till this point was because he rejected most of her suggestions on how to deal with others. If Albedo ever received full authority, it would probably end in wide-scale purges.

Although I think that's a groundless fear...maybe...

"Yes. I felt like I was a bit too angry as well. Forgive me, Mare."

"Eh, Ah, no, there's no need. Albedo-san was right. ...I was in the wrong. I am terribly sorry."

After they bowed to each other (with Mare taking a deeper bow from the waist), this incident could be considered resolved for now.

"...So, where were we at? Ah, that's right. As I will be heading to the Elven country for a paid vacation with these two, I want the twins to make sure that their substitutes will be in place. First of all, transfer your work to the substitutes within three days. If possible...entrust it to the Area Guardians under you instead of the Floor Guardians. If that's not possible—"

Ainz thought it would be hard for Albedo, as it has been only a short while since the destruction of the Kingdom.

"Discuss it with Pandora's Actor, all right?"

He got an energetic reply from them.

"So what about Ainz-sama's retinue? Will it be Hanzos?"

That's not a bad idea, or rather, Hanzos were just too convenient to use. To be honest, he wanted to summon more if money and data weren't an issue. The Hanzo mercenaries' data was used up, but there was data for other ninja-type monsters in the library still. It would be great if he could use those but—

—I would rather not use the assets in the treasury if possible, so I'll have to bear with this until I can save up enough personal wealth. Or, should I prioritize strengthening Nazarick defenses first? I should think about this on the way to the Elven country. Aaah, I want money...Money I am free to use however I want...I wonder if there's someone with some treasure stashed away. The kind of person who can't complain even if I steal it.

"...Ainz-sama?"

"Hmm? ...Ah, sorry. It seems like I was lost in thought for quite a while. About the retinue—"

Ainz stopped himself before saying "Hanzos will do." It was generally said that excellent employees were all good at reading the mood. Although Ainz was a mediocre employee, perhaps he had rolled a crit just for this moment, because

his intuition told him to shut his mouth for a moment.

It is because he managed to read some slightly different emotions than usual in Albedo's tone.

"—No, I did not originally plan to take Hanzos along, but is there some work you wanted the Hanzos to do?"

"Ah, no, as you don't plan to take Hanzos this time, it's not my place to object to Ainz-sama's decision..." Albedo hesitated for a bit as she tried to read Ainz's mood from his face. "Some have been vocally complaining that the Hanzos were the only ones being called upon so much...there are a lot of people who want to work for Ainz-sama, so I wanted to ask if they could be given a chance."

As Ainz started to contemplate it, Albedo immediately shook her hands in a fluster.

"It's already good enough that Ainz-sama is now aware that there are people eager to serve given the chance."

Ainz mentally facepalmed while responding with an "umu."

Ainz—Suzuki Satoru was just an ordinary person, so he never imagined that such a problem could exist.

He was using the Hanzos a lot, for sure, but to let others have such an impression was pretty bad.

Favoritism would always exist within a company. It was natural that it would be easier for people who were liked by their superiors to be promoted even if their talent was a little inferior compared to their colleagues. That said, favoritism would cause the social relations inside the company to worsen.

That was not good. Was he not just thinking that even though Nazarick was a black company, it was somehow running smoothly because of the strength of its internal social relations?

He couldn't say, "I will just take the Hanzos" in such a situation.

"Well, let's just decide the retinue later—no, we should at least inform them soon. It'll be interesting to see who I choose and how you prepare so that my choice wouldn't matter, don't you think?"

Ainz gave a smile, while feeling entirely different in his heart.

Albedo bowed her head with an expression that said, "I see. As expected of Ainz-sama".

"Understood. I will immediately inform all the denizens of Nazarick."

"Umu. I am relying on you."

Ainz stood up and left the room with only Lumière following him. He then let

out a large sigh like a salaryman who had just ended his workday.



Albedo lifted her head on hearing the door close and her eyes met with the other two who had lifted their heads at the same time.

“About that, Albedo. I want to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

Albedo responded as she stood up.

“Although Ainz-sama said he is visiting the Elven country on paid vacation...what do you think is his goal? There’s no way he is just thinking about enjoying himself right?”

“—of course.”

“Eh? I-is that so?”

The supreme ruler of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown, was a wise king whose every single move might contain many meanings behind it. One should think there were at least three goals behind each of them.

One’s position as a king was not a thing to be taken lightly. It’s not like a coat that one could don and doff according to their mood. Even if he said that he was on vacation—even if the other countries believed it—he was still the illustrious king of the Sorcerer Kingdom at the end of the day. Each and every movement of his could be thought of as having the Sorcerer Kingdom’s agenda behind them. Any idiot could understand that.

Therefore, it stood to reason that there was another meaning hidden in his act of taking a paid vacation to the Elven country.

“Then what do you think Ainz-sama’s goal is?”

“As he mentioned, improving the organization was probably a part of it, but collecting intel is probably the main goal.” Albedo said as she pondered. “I think Demiurge could probably give a better answer...the Theocracy should be deploying a large-scale offensive against the Elven country right about now.”

“Y-you mean that T-theocracy?”

Information regarding the Theocracy was circulated around Nazarick, so there was no need to explain the fundamentals.

“Yes. After finding out that their hypothetical enemy, the Sorcerer Kingdom, has entered into conflict with the Kingdom, they would naturally try to finish

their war with the Elves once and for all.”

“Because it would be bad to fight on two fronts, right?”

“That’s right. Although the Theocracy is not at war with us right now, considering the future situation, it’s best not to divide their forces between the northern and the southern fronts. In that case, it’s highly likely that they are moving out a large force to attack the Elven country. It’s hard to think they will have peace talks at this point, but I am not sure.”

For Albedo, it was not a problem if the Elven country was destroyed by the Theocracy. On the contrary, it was even better for them if the Theocracy enslaved the Elves so that they could gain the great Casus Belli to liberate the Elves. That could increase the amount of options they had against the Theocracy, but it seems like their Master thought differently of the situation. Perhaps he was going there because he wanted to gain more information before making a decision.

Demiurge would have probably answered with certainty if he was here.

Albedo had a leg up over Demiurge when it came to internal affairs, but she had to concede to him on military issues. She had always lost to Demiurge in that subject. While this thought formed in her head, she tilted her head wondering why Demiurge was so silent regarding this matter.

Is Demiurge making moves while keeping it a secret from us? Is he planning something by collecting intel on the situation within the Elven country secretly? I don’t think that’s the case but...

As Demiurge often worked outside of Nazarick, he received more discretionary powers compared to the other Floor Guardians. Or rather, it was more accurate to say that the other guardians didn’t use their privileges as much. That said, he always described the information collected and his actions in very detailed reports (which always ended up being hefty and a bother to read) to their master, which passed through her. That was why Albedo believed that he couldn’t be up to something without her noticing it since she didn’t receive any reports regarding the Elven country.

Considering Demiurge’s personality, it’s unlikely that he was hiding things. He probably just didn’t get around to doing it yet.

However, the truth was she couldn’t be completely sure about it.

She should probably go and meet him immediately after leaving this place. No—she should summon him over. She shouldn’t have the talk in his domain, but if she had her subordinates wait at their side during their talk, it was likely

that Demiurge would try to sound out her intentions.

But if he was to bring his devils along...no, would he even take such short-sighted actions? Is he doubting me? He hasn't made a move yet so the problem is—

“A-are we going to fight the Theocracy?”

“Eh? Ah, yes, about that. We don't know if it will happen. Maybe even Ainz-sama isn't sure and that's why he is using a paid vacation as an excuse.”

Albedo quickly replied in a fluster, jolted out of her thoughts by Mare's question. Even though she pondered for quite a while, there was no suspicion in the twins' eyes. She decided to save her thoughts on Demiurge for later.

Perhaps this time their master was thinking of traveling not as the ruler of Nazarick, but just as an undead on a paid vacation. That way, even if the worst were to happen, the damage to Nazarick would be minimized.

“Maybe just this once, there were some elements that even Ainz-sama wasn't sure of, so he is trying to make moves independent of Nazarick.”

“No way!”

“Eeeh? You are t-talking about that Ainz-sama, y-you know?”

The two elves raised their voices, filled with surprise, and looked at Albedo with eyes filled with disbelief.

Their master's wisdom had managed to read and control everything until now. They saw many times when one of his unremarkable moves ended up being the fatal strike for the opponent. According to what they've heard, he already had a general idea of the next thousand years and was making moves accordingly.

It was natural to doubt Albedo, who said that their Master could be uncertain about something.

“...As expected, even Albedo couldn't completely read through our master's intentions——”

Albedo directed a bitter smile at Aura, who spoke with her hands crossed behind her head.

“First of all, it's impossible for anyone to see the depths of Ainz-sama's great plans. That is something I have experienced repeatedly till now...frankly speaking, I still don't understand the reason why Ainz-sama used the word “paid vacation”. Just keep in mind that as you are going to the Elven country, it's highly likely that you will have to face the Theocracy.”

The two guardians nodded with serious expressions.

“A-are we allowed to take along our own subordinates...”

“Other than those selected by Ainz-sama you mean...”

Albedo considered Mare's suggestion. While it could be taken as an affront to their master, it could also possibly make him happy that they prepared some on their own.

"If Ainz sama wants a small elite force...no, wait," Albedo started to consider the matter on a deeper level.

"Select a group for the smaller retinue and another one in case it's large, tentatively...on my side I will discuss with Demiurge about Ainz-sama's goals and inform you later."

The way Ainz-sama was extremely worried about the deterioration of Nazarick's organizational capacity. Is that also one of the factors this time?

Upon informing him that there was nothing to worry about, she was answered with sarcastic praise. It was probably because of her failure to understand the full extent of his unease and her inability to answer the trust placed in her.

He was especially worried about that point...

For the time being, they had acquired someone who rivaled them in terms of intelligence to work under them. Did he intend to say that even that is not enough? Or was it something else...

Albedo spoke after she heard the twins' acknowledging her suggestions.

"I think we will get a hint of Ainz-sama's intentions from his choice of personnel for the retinue...but I expect the work this time to be of an extremely high level. Take notice of everything without lowering your guard and keep your wits about you at all times."

The two guardians gave a spirited response to Albedo.

Considering their combat strength, she was sure that they would be able to protect their master, but one should never be careless.

She should discuss with Demiurge and prepare for the total mobilization of Nazarick just in case.

Even though it will slow down dealing with the remnants of the Kingdom, we should prepare for it just to be sure

Albedo left the room with the other two while arranging the order of her duties inside her head.



Chapter 2 Nazarick-style Traveling Experience

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1

It could be said that there were no chokepoints in the Great Forest of Evasha where the elves reside. There were certainly places with dangerous monsters, small nations of demihumans, and impossible labyrinths, but there were no structures that could be called a fortress or impassable physical barriers. However, there existed a place that could be called a chokepoint.

It was the work of a single person.

The Holocaust Scripture's vice-captain, Schoen, tried looking ahead of him while he hid behind the scattered trees.

There sat a girl of around 8 years old who looked even younger than her age would suggest, as Elves tended to.

She was sitting on a small chair on top of a slight incline, holding a bow too large for her. There was a quiver beside the chair with a few arrows poking out of it.

There were fewer arrows in that small quiver than could be counted with both hands, but they were informed beforehand that the arrows would never run out. There was no doubt that it was a magic item.

No one was around except for the girl.

...That was what scared him.

A hero could overturn the tides of battle by themselves. You could say that one of them was equal to an army of ten thousand. In fact, this girl in front of him had already taken over a thousand lives from the Theocracy's army.

An army of 40,000 was being nailed down by a single girl sitting primly on a chair.

The recommended strategy in such situations was to move around the obstacle. It wasn't like they had to break through from here. The great forest itself was a natural barrier but it was not impossible to take a detour.

That said, the opponent was not an army, but a single combatant. It was easy to take note of an enemy's movements if they were in large numbers, but this girl was more than just an exceptional combatant. As an individual, she would also be more mobile than their army. Once they lost sight of her, it would be hard to find her again. If an enemy capable of fighting an army alone was left to their own devices in the dark depths of the great forest—there was no need to say that the vanguard's morale would take a plunge.

They could also try and delay her by pinning her down with a small force while letting the larger force advance. That was not exactly a bad idea, except for the fact that it was idiotic to divide their forces in a hostile land.

So, it could be said that this was their best chance: while the opponent was deployed (although, it's doubtful if sitting on a chair could be considered as deployment) like this. The top brass decided that she should be dealt with while they knew of her location, even if they had to sacrifice some of their forces.

"Only a hero could stand against a hero" goes the aphorism. Nothing would be solved by sending in the riff-raff.

There were no heroes within the Theocracy's invasion army this time, so it fell to the Holocaust Scripture to deal with this.

But there were no heroes in the Holocaust Scripture either. There used to be one, but he was transferred to the Black Scripture. In the Theocracy, anybody who stepped into the realm of heroes would be moved to the Black Scripture.

Unfortunately, Schoen is yet to step into that realm.

Despite that, they were sent to this battlefield because it was widely believed that the Holocaust Scripture could take down a hero when they worked as a team.

And that's true.

The Holocaust Scripture can kill heroes.

But, there was a large difference between those who just stepped into the realm of heroes and those who were nearly outliers. Even if they could win against the former, it was impossible for them to triumph against the latter. That was why Schoen was observing the girl seriously.

Common soldiers, stronger soldiers, elite soldiers, heroes, and outliers... Schoen, who had seen beings of various levels, had enough knowledge and intelligence to measure her strength accurately and minimize their casualties as much as possible.

Although not comparable to the Black Scripture, the members selected for the Holocaust Scripture were elites in their own right (but you could say the same for any of the six scriptures). He didn't want them to be killed for no reason.

Depending on her strength, he might have to give the order to sacrifice some soldiers to hold her back while they waited for the Black Scripture to get dispatched from the Theocracy.

Schoen slowly let out a slow, long breath.

Though he was hiding behind the trees with [Invisibility] and [Silence]—[Silence] was not originally an arcane spell, but this version was developed for use by magic casters—he still had to be mindful even when taking a breath.

He wanted to wipe the sweat off his forehead, but considering any of his movements could lead to certain death, he chose not to. Schoen might be a talented caster, but he was only a little better than the ordinary person at stealth without using magic.

The elf girl was probably a ranger or an archer. If it was the former, it was possible for her to sense Schoen even though he was being hidden by magic. She might not know his exact location, but she could just use an area-of-effect attack—which she was confirmed to be able to do—to smoke him out.

Schoen wouldn't die from a single attack even if the opponent was a hero, but he was not confident in escaping smoothly if he was wounded.

Even more than his fear of death, Schoen was afraid that he might die in vain without bringing back the intel he collected.

—But she really was an unpleasant brat

She hadn't made a single move since he started observing her. Her glazed expression makes her look like a doll.

But, Schoen knew she was a living being, not a doll.

After an unknown amount of time since he started his observation, the target finally moved.

Schoen's heart flinched, worrying if the target found him at last.

However, the target did not look at him, but that didn't mean he could let down his guard. For people who honed their skills to their limits, it was child's play to feint with their eyes. In fact, Schoen knew that such a skill actually existed.

With his hearing strengthened by [Elephant Ear], he soon heard a large group of people approaching from behind. They were likely the ones his target noticed.

He was sure that they were his peers—soldiers of the Theocracy.

Schoen suddenly felt guilty, because he knew the reason why they were sent here.

He would not warn them, because that's what his duty demanded.

Still, he would not leave anything unobserved. That was all he could do.

The target's true strength could only be understood if they saw her fight. Those soldiers were the sacrifices the top brass sent for that purpose.

They were going to sacrifice the valuable lives of their comrades. Schoen turned to look behind him, making sure he would not get noticed by the target. His eyes, strengthened by the second-tier magic [Hawk-eye], spotted an arrow flying over.

The lone arrow bent around the trees in its path and then, it scattered into multiple arrows mid-air, turning into a rain of arrows that covered a large area.

The arrow was not probably aimed at anything specific. Even if she could locate her target through sound, this was in the middle of the forest. It was impossible to snipe accurately with all the trees around. But something like a [Fireball] would be able to burn beyond these obstructions. She was just emulating it by combining the ability to weave through the gaps between the trees with the ability to multiply the arrows.

Schoen's strengthened ears picked up cries of pain from the soldiers. It seemed like no one was left unscathed.

—cries? They are still alive?

The soldiers milled about in confusion, fearing the arrows that came from beyond their vision. As no one managed to figure out the trajectory the arrows flew in, everyone started to run hither-thither. There was no fighting spirit left in them.

They weren't exactly doing the wrong thing. In fact, it could be said they were responding correctly by scattering around randomly, which would let at least a few of them survive.

The girl fired another arrow.

It weaved through the spaces between trees again and then multiplied. Among the rain of arrows, the sounds of pitiful cries and trampled undergrowth gradually came to a halt.

He learned one important thing as a result of the deaths of these soldiers.

She couldn't kill an ordinary soldier in a single attack. Of course, considering the ability—martial art—that made the arrows multiply, it stood to reason that each arrow would have reduced precision and damage. That said, a hero could kill every one of those regular soldiers with a single attack. It could mean only one thing.

—She isn't a hero. That brat didn't step into the realm of heroes

That was Schoen's conclusion.

It was because he worked hard to match his rival, the third seat of the Black Scripture, "Earth, Wind & Fire (ft. Water)", that he could be sure of his conclusion.

(T/N: Third seat's title should be "The Four Elements", the same kanji as Inveria's traditions)

She was weaker than Schoen, but that didn't mean they could be at ease.

The fighting styles of a magic caster and an archer are strong in their own ways. Even if he was stronger than her in general, the battle could still go either way. It was also possible that she was hiding her true strength after realizing she was under observation.

But, Schoen, the observer in question, could say with certainty that she didn't notice yet.

There was only one thing left for them to do. Remove the obstacle in the path of the Theocracy's advance.

He activated [Silent Magic - Wall of Protection from Arrows].

He didn't feel like that was enough preparation, but she might notice something suspicious and escape. if he tried to do more at this distance.

He can only strengthen his resolve.

[Silent Maximized Magic - Magic Arrow].

He came out of hiding from behind the tree and activated his abilities at the same time. He also activated the once-per-day trump card of the Arcane Devotee class that Holocaust Scripture required its members to acquire. He used it to access the spell-strengthening metamagics he had yet to learn. Naturally, he chose [Triplet Magic].

A total of twelve magic arrows flew out at the same time.

One could not escape from these arrows, but unfortunately, the damage of a single arrow was not enough. As long as there's not much difference between the strengths of the opponent and the caster, it would be hard to kill them even with [Maximize Magic]. But—that was only true if he was fighting alone.

All of his subordinates were observing Schoen's movements with [See Invisibility].

Their target's expression changed in an instant.

Perhaps it was because she was in pain from Schoen's attack, or perhaps it was because she saw the hundred plus [Magic Arrows] coming at her from behind Schoen.

Holocaust Scripture was entrusted with assassination and counter-terrorism work that required them to be flexible, so their teams consisted of at least four members, each with different jobs. This was similar to the adventurers' tactics in the Kingdom and the Empire. As the adventurers' guilds were in fact created secretly by the Theocracy, you could even call them brothers-in-arms. The tactic this time relied upon a team consisting of one common class. On top of that, only those who could use a specific skill were selected. The end result was a team of magic casters who could also use [Invisibility].

Hit.

Hit.

Hit.

Hit.

It was like wings of light flew across the sky.

The target collapsed on the ground and laid still with her face down. Even so, only Schoen approached her.

He didn't think the target, who was an archer, could use it, but there were illusions that could make one appear dead. He can't let his guard down yet.

He put his foot under her body and flipped her around.

There was not a single part of the child's body that was without wounds from being hit by their magic arrows. Schoen took a closer look at her face. There was no light in the eyes that peeked out from under her swollen eyelids.

She was dead for sure.

"Huh. —Right back at you, you shitty brat"

They didn't select [Magic Arrow] just so that it could be an act of symbolic revenge. People like rangers with keen senses could sometimes sense and escape from damage if they were attacked with area-of-effect spells.

Mental attacks were situationally effective at dealing fatal damage in a single blow, but there was a high probability that it would just get nullified. So, since he had others to back him up, he chose to use a method that was guaranteed to hit the opponent.

Be that as it may, it was still the best spell they could have used to take revenge for the soldiers killed by her arrows.

Schoen wrinkled his brows at the dead child's face.

He felt like there was a hint of tranquility in it.

Maybe he was just mistaken, but if he wasn't, that would be extremely irritating. This elf killed nearly a thousand of his comrades from Theocracy, so he wanted her to die in painful agony, regretting her actions at the end.

Schoen stopped himself before he could spit on her corpse. He had to get the equipment off of her first. He planned to do it here as there were no enemies around. He would probably feel disgusted if he had to touch his own saliva in the process, so he should spit after he took them off her.

First, the bow.

It was the weapon of an opponent who managed to stop the Theocracy's army by herself. It should be something good.

"Good grief."

Schoen suddenly went stiff upon hearing the nonchalant voice of a man. Although he should have responded immediately, the suddenness shocked him to a stop. Turning to look at the source of the voice, Schoen found a single elf.

There wasn't supposed to be anyone here, there was no mistake about that. There should be no elves other than the target present. He even took care to use [See invisibility] while approaching the target.

"Human, did you know? That fighting with the strong, with one's life on the line, is the fastest way to become stronger? Though I took her away from her mother and threw her into the battle immediately, thinking that she was a success..."

The voice sounded disappointed. The elf looked at the girl's dead body with scorn. "You useless shit. You are even worse than the other failures for wasting my time. As I thought, people who can't bring forth the king's essence are no different than trash"

Schoen already understood who the elf was.

His heterochromatic eyes were clear enough proof.

The final target of the Theocracy.

A deplorable criminal.

It was the Elf king.

An existence that even heroes couldn't win against, never mind Schoen. Someone above even the Outliers.

There was no chance of victory.

[Silent Magic - Invisibility]

Schoen panicked, immediately activated the spell, and moved a short distance.

Yet, the Elf king's eyes followed him. Even though he just moved a short distance from the place where he cast [Invisibility], the elf king clearly saw him.

The moment he realized that, Schoen ran with his back turned to the Elf king. He can't hide the grass being trampled by him even if he was using [Invisibility] and [Silence], but he couldn't stop running.

Still, the elf king didn't shift his gaze even a bit from Schoen. It didn't seem like he was using [See Invisibility] to see him perfectly. He was seeing through [Invisibility] and [Silence] with just his extraordinary sight. That was why Schoen had to create some distance between them. If the opponent was not using anti-stealth abilities to find him, only increasing the space between them would make it easier to hide.

For just a moment, he regretted not using [Fly] to escape, but he couldn't do it anyway because of one of the classes he acquired.

Adepts of Surshana had a special ability with a limited number of uses per day. This ability allowed them to extend the effective time of a spell by consuming their mana. Taking advantage of that ability, he had already exhausted most of his mana to maintain his other spells; therefore, he did not have enough mana to effectively use [Fly].

Also, one would have to be mad to use [Fly] as it made them defenseless while within the reach of the Elf king. Schoen wasn't that desperate yet. It was more practical to use it after he could get far away enough and hide among the trees.

“—Hah”

He heard the Elf king scoff behind him.

“It's meaningless to kill you people but—I went through all this trouble to come here, so I might as well do it to relieve my boredom.”

As a magic caster, Schoen wasn't exactly skilled at moving his body. Even so, as someone who stood at the boundary to the realm of heroes, he could cross vast distances with little effort. After Schoen managed to get far enough away, the Elf king's voice suddenly echoed in his ears, which were strengthened by

[Elephant Ear].

“Go—Kill everyone, Behemoth”

The land shook around him. He understood that something huge had appeared without needing to look.

“Disperse!” He shouted, canceling [Silence] so that his voice could reach his subordinates.

He had never shouted so loud in his entire life. If the Elf king grimaced a bit at this, then it’s even better.

He needed his subordinates to do their best now, even if it meant throwing away some people’s lives as sacrifices. Getting the intel back home was the only way to recompense the lost lives.

Schoen, who was nearest to the elf king, would certainly die. So he turned back. If he died before his subordinates, that would be a good thing in itself.

He had seen Earth Elementals before. They were weird chubby-looking things, smaller than humans and with arms too large for their bodies. But, the one that stood before him was not such a cute thing.

A misshapen body made of boulders and mineral ore, and as large as the trees around it, enough to make one call it the Earth Elemental Lord.

Thick and long arms with stout but short legs. Maybe it would have looked comical if it was much smaller, but its arms and legs displayed power that no monster should be capable of. The elf king stood behind it, looking at Schoen’s desperate struggle with a sneer.

His attitude was absolutely disgusting.

Someone who took lives without betting his own.

Unconcerned about things like Schoen’s anger, the Elf king immediately closed the gap between them with graceful movements as if he was skating over ice. The Earth Elemental—Behemoth, lifted its two giant arms high into the air.

“—try me, you piece of shit! [Wall of Stone]”

A stone wall was erected between the Elf king and him.

In the very next moment, it was broken with a single strike, with its pieces melting away into the air.

Though there were other factors, the strength and durability of a wall tended to be proportional to the caster’s strength. Even so—no, maybe it showed that the Elemental summoned by the Elf king was just that strong.

Behemoth immediately lifted its left fist.

Schoen saw the Elf king standing there with a satisfied grin from the corner of

his vision and understood what he was thinking. He knew what would happen. He was probably thinking that Schoen would die from the next attack.

He was certainly not wrong.

The Behemoth's fist will reach Schoen before he could cast another spell, and then he will die.

Even so—

I managed to buy some time

He wasted his opponent's time, even if it was only a few moments, but that is enough.

It was more than enough.

At least one person would survive to return to the Theocracy because of this. It's a defeat for Schoen, but not for the Theocracy.

In the next moment, Schoen was turned into pulp by Behemoth's fist, with a smile on his face till the very end.



The Elf king—Decem Hougán, passed through his castle gate, letting out a sigh from feeling unpleasant.

It took too much time to return to the castle which put him in a bad mood.

By riding the indefatigable Behemoth, he likely returned in the fastest way possible. Even so, wasting time was a bore and he hated the stress it gave him.

Retrieving the weapons he gave to his failed creation was certainly not a waste of time—he should in fact be praised for it. The gear he gave her were things he received from his father, things that no one else could make. He could not let them fall into the hands of humans who couldn't understand their value.

But, the problem was that there was no one else who could complete such an important task.

He didn't have underlings who he could entrust such issues with. It was because all of them were weak.

All of them were useless.

Elves were a splendid race. His father was the proof of that fact, that they were a race that could become stronger than anyone else. If Decem was a special type of Elf like a High Elf or an Elf Lord, he would have concluded that the others were just worse and that would be the end of it. However, that wasn't the case. His

father was also just an Elf. This meant any Elf could become strong.

That's why he couldn't understand why the others were so weak.

How could he prove that Elves were the greatest race?

He just had to achieve something that others could see.

He just had to make this world the dominion of the Elves—of him who held such a revered bloodline.

He required excellent—strong females for that.

(T/N: he's got the incel mentality, if that wasn't obvious enough)

But, he couldn't be sure which females had superior wombs until the children were nurtured. So, he sent all of his children to fight in the war but almost none of them managed to return.

He was bothered by the fact that even after doing this for such a long time, he had no results to show for it.

A female approached Decem, who looked quite menacing as he thought about various things.

“—my king”

“What is it?”

He directed his simmering anger at the female and then slightly widened his eyes with surprise.

A strong person's (i.e. Decem's) stare contained within it strong emotions—especially if it was filled with hostility or the intent to kill. As a result, it tended to break weaker beings. Yes, he didn't direct his killing intent at her, only his anger. Even so, weaker beings should still be affected and though this female went pale, she withstood it.

She was just supposed to be a weak female.

In that case, how did she withstand his aura? Perhaps it was because he was exhausted. He didn't really care but he should reward her for being able to withstand it.

So, he stopped to look at her. Decem was a merciful lord.

“How is that child?”

Who is “that child” supposed to be? What exactly was she thinking by asking him such meaningless questions instead of first thanking the king for his hard work after a long trip? He lost his motivation immediately.

“I am asking about Roogi”

Roogi.

He didn't remember such a name.

Decem can't really remember names, because there was almost no one who was worthy enough to be remembered by him.

From his point of view, remembering useless names was a waste of memory. It's not that his memory was limited, but there's no meaning to using his memory for unimportant things. In fact, he couldn't understand why so many people try to memorize useless things.

The female shifted her gaze to the bow in Decem's hands.

"So, she died"

Something clicked in him. It was about that failure, the one who managed to die even though he gave her such precious weapons. He felt ashamed that half of the blood that flowed in her veins was his own. No—rather, it was because it was not more than half that she got killed by someone like humans.

"Yeah, she died"

"Is...that so"

Her voice trembled.

She was also probably feeling ashamed upon remembering that her blood flowed through that failed creation, but that failure was still stronger than her. This female should be even more ashamed.

But it was the king's duty to give people a chance.

Decem felt moved at how gentle a king he was that he would show mercy even for the incompetent.

"Come to my room later. I will give you another chance"

Decem started walking without waiting for a reply. He should get these weapons to the treasury first.

After he returned from the treasury, Decem washed off the dirt from the battlefield and laid on the bed in his room.

While he was waiting like that, a man came requesting his permission to enter. He couldn't see that female anywhere behind him.

"...What is it?"

"I have information for the king. The woman summoned by the king, named Myuugi, has committed suicide"

"Suicide?"

"Yes. She did it by jumping from the castle"

"What? She died from falling from just that height...no, I forget that you people are only that strong"

Decem pondered for a bit. He couldn't think of a reason for her suicide. First

of all, he had just summoned her to his bed, so she should have been joyful. Maybe it's not suicide, but instead, she got murdered by someone who envied her.

"...Are you sure that it's a suicide?"

"Yes. We are sure, as there was someone who saw her do it."

Decem thought for a moment that maybe that witness was the murderer, but if it really was a suicide, what could have been the reason? After he mulled it over for a while, Decem finally found the answer.

"I see... So it's something like that. I understand now. She was sorry for giving birth to a useless daughter and killed herself as an apology, right?"

"...Only she can know her true feelings, but you are probably right, my king"

The man replied with an expressionless face.

"...In that case, give her a fitting funeral. She used her life to apologize after all. It's a king's duty to forgive others"

"I am grateful for my king's merciful consideration"

Decem nodded regally at the man who was bowing deeply. As he thought, kings should be merciful like this to useless beings.

Feeling extremely compassionate, Decem decided to reward the loyal man—he didn't remember his name—in front of him.

"Do you have any daughters?"

"...Yes...I do"

"You are fortunate. Send them here if they are already of age. If they aren't, your wife works too"

The man looked like he was deeply moved. After his body shook all over, he spoke like he was trying to squeeze the words out.

"Understood, my king..."

He left the room and Decem proceeded to forget about that female. He didn't care about what happened to some useless female.

2

Above the great forest sprawling far south from the Sorcerer Kingdom, to the south of the Theocracy.

Ainz stared at the land below with the winds raging around him.

“So this is what they call the Great Forest. It’s more like a sea of trees...yes, The Great Sea of Trees.”

Due to it being nighttime and the deepness of the greenery that extended below him, it looked like it was painted black. When the winds brushed the canopy, waves rippled out just like the sea. He felt like this was the land most suitable to be called The Great Sea of Trees. In fact, this forest was larger than the Great Forest of Tob and the Azerlisia Mountain Range put together. It might even be larger than the entire Kingdom.

This is The Great Sea of Trees from now as far as the Sorcerer Kingdom is concerned

This outrageously large forest had no landmarks to speak of as far as he could see. Various species should have built independent civilizations that changed the surroundings to suit their lifestyles in this forest, but he did not find any signs of those changes from the sky.

—Maybe they are being hidden by the canopy. Their civilizations probably developed to hide themselves from the sky because there are monsters that can fly

But, he did discover two things.

One was the crescent-shaped lake that was said to be the location of the Elven capital. He discovered it comparatively quickly due to its large size.

The other one was the earthen road that extended from the Theocracy.

It was artificially made by clearing the forest for the advance of the Theocracy’s armies.

It looked like a thread compared to the gigantic forest around it, but it should

be over 100 meters wide. He shouldn't be able to see it from the sky if it wasn't at least that wide. He thought that was a lot of useless work, but there was probably no other way for them to establish a level of safety in this giant forest. Considering the amount of time and labor that road would have required, one could feel the Theocracy's obsession with wiping out the Elven country.

But I can't understand it at all. Why is this the only thing that stands out? Did the Theocracy stop its advance?

If they wanted to destroy the Elven villages, wasn't felling the trees and then creating forest fires the best way to do it? The forest was not dry but it wasn't very humid either. Destroying the Elven villages should be easy as long as they took care of their surroundings when they start the fires.

They want to take the Elves as slaves so they are not burning them down? In that case, it seems like the theocracy isn't that pressed...Maybe there's just that much of a difference between the strength of their forces

He didn't find any burned patches of forest from the sky, but he couldn't be sure considering he was far above the land. Perhaps Aura would have noticed if she was here.

And that bunch of lights over there should be the Theocracy's vanguard camp...

Humans couldn't see in the dark, so the larger their encampment, the more likely it was bright enough to be seen from far away.

But, due to various reasons—especially his position in the sky—it was hard to get a good idea of the distance between the camp and the capital. He had no idea how long it would take the army to reach the capital if they proceeded in a straight line while clearing the forest.

Ainz believed that he had seen all he needed to see, so he activated [Greater Teleportation].

It was easy to be seen from the ground if he stayed in the sky without any cover. There were many people with superior vision, so he certainly couldn't be careless even though it was night.

Of course, if the other side noticed him, he could easily escape before they could climb the height of thousands of meters to reach him. Still, there was no merit in letting others know about his presence here. So, Ainz did not dispel [Perfect Unknowable].

From Ainz's analysis of the information he gathered, most of the living beings in this world were weak.

Yet, he couldn't say with certainty that there was no one equal to him in

regions he had no information on. He should proceed while assuming that “maybe” they do exist. Since the enemy can prepare countermeasures if information regarding him was leaked, a card of his exposed was a step closer to his defeat.

...Well then, the next should be the Elven capital

—Deep in the night.

The forest was gloomy with very little moonlight, but that was not an issue to Ainz. He came down from the sky using [Fly], using it to float just above the ground so that he wouldn’t step on the undergrowth and advanced towards his target.

He already understood how far the Theocracy’s army had advanced. Next, he had to collect information in the Elven Royal Capital.

The space before him opened up gradually.

Elven houses were made from short and stout trees called Elf Trees and the Royal Capital where a large number of them were gathered looked like a forest. The construction was the same as in any other Elven village, but it was especially striking when they were gathered in such large numbers. Maybe it was because they were denser in the capital, but it was overwhelming enough to pressure even him. Ainz felt like avoiding the place because it reminded him of his former gray-tinted world.

The trees were cleared around the Royal Capital and instead converted into a large field of grass.

That was not a natural phenomenon, but something the Elves did for the capital’s defense. It was made to provide better visibility, making it harder for an enemy to approach the capital without being seen.

But on the other hand, maybe this could also be considered as the Elf Tree’s survival strategy

He initially didn’t feel anything strange when he heard that the Elves grew Elf Trees with magic, but perhaps instead, the Elf Trees were using the Elves to multiply themselves.

He could imagine Elf Trees as a kind of monster. He should probably investigate this more to find out if they were intelligent.

Ainz tried to see ahead of him as he thought about how to investigate this and whether or not he should entrust it to Mare.

There should be guards on the lookout, surveying the cover-less grasslands. It would be hard to break through without using magic.

That said, it should be possible for an Aura-level ranger. High-level rangers had the ability to stay hidden even if there was no cover. If the level difference between them was large enough, it was possible for the observer to not notice anything out of place even if they met eyes with the ranger. He had heard from Aura that the stealth capabilities of a highly-skilled ranger was good enough to make you think that they were nothing but a pebble by the road, but Ainz had his doubts about the veracity of that claim. He had experimented on their journey here by having Aura go into hiding, but Ainz was more or less able to detect Aura when she didn't use any magic items or special abilities to boost her skills. That was because Aura had her levels divided between ranger and beast tamer, and it was also because Ainz was just too high-leveled so his base stats were high. Ainz felt regret at not being able to personally experience what Aura talked about.

Leaving that matter aside, Ainz was not good enough at stealth to infiltrate the Royal Capital without using magic. So, he cast [Perfect Unknowable] and on top of that, turned into an elf with illusion magic.

Though it would be difficult to break through his [Perfect Unknowable] considering the strength of an average person in this world, he still had to be careful just like when he was flying in the sky. That was why he went as far as creating an illusion as well.

He never thought for a moment that he knew everything there was to know about this world's special abilities and techniques. After all, Ainz's knowledge came from his time in Yggdrasil and even that was not perfect.

He should assume that the other side is using an ability all the time to see through invisibility, just like Ainz did.

Ainz also wore a magic item called the Ghillie-Ghillie Mantle as a part of his stealth setup. Despite covering himself in layers of stealth, he also prepared measures to fool the enemy in case he was discovered. One could never be too careful.

Let's start then.

After he reached the boundary between the forest and the grassland—there was no cover to be found further in—Ainz observed the capital.

He could see Elves making rounds on the bridges connecting the outer circle of trees that made up the Royal Capital.

They were probably equivalent to a city's walls, the bridges being the allures on said walls.

He didn't know if they lacked the skills to see through his [Perfect

Unknowable] or if they were just not paying attention, but the soldiers didn't act like they had noticed him. Well, he was going through all this trouble to stay hidden, it would have been embarrassing if they managed to find him so quickly.

After he made sure that he wouldn't be in the line of sight of those soldiers, Ainz took out a scroll.

Then he activated the scr—he hesitated.

He started again—and hesitated.

He had resolved to use it before coming here, but even so, he couldn't help but feel that it was such a waste. He turned reluctant to activate the scroll every time a thought flashed by that there should be a better way.

He wouldn't have hesitated if he was in a battle with his life on the line—but the fact that he wasn't in such a desperate situation was the root cause of his hesitation.

After a while, Ainz succeeded in clearing his head and finally activated the scroll. He would have hesitated again if he thought about anything at all.

The activated spell was [God's Eye].

A ninth-tier spell that created an intangible and invisible eye. This was probably the first time he used this since that time with the lizardmen.

Its range was far greater than [Remote Viewing] and it could also pass through obstacles like walls.

While this spell was excellent for spying, you couldn't say that it was the absolute best there was. Though it was invisible, it could easily be detected by second-tier detection spells. Plus, even though it was intangible, if it was destroyed in an attack, the caster would receive damage as feedback. Since this was also considered divination, the opponent could find his location through anti-divination measures or an attack could come flying over if it triggered any automated defenses. The fact that this eye itself didn't have any HP and it wouldn't use Ainz's level or defenses was the main issue.

Even so, as it was far better than going over there and directly observing, it was valuable at times.

It flew at a constant speed—but so slow that Ainz felt a bit impatient—and finally reached the city walls.

Three Elf guards equipped with bows were patrolling as a team, but no one noticed the approaching [God's Eye].

Seems like there's no one with anti-invisibility skills here but... I can't be sure that there's no one among the Elves who have classes with such abilities.

There was no reason for them to overlook the eye if they noticed it, so he should be correct. However, he shouldn't be careless because it was their first intel-gathering mission in a previously unknown place.

Ainz's [God's Eye] passed under the walkways and entered the capital. He immediately brought the eye back after it just entered the city, and then moved it in front of the three guards from before. It appeared that they were talking about something, but they still hadn't noticed the eye.

"Fuuu. it's all good..."

Ainz breathed a sigh of relief.

Just like Nazarick, guild bases had traps that activated the moment they were invaded, weakening or nullifying certain types of magic. They could break [Invisibility], reduce the strength of the holy element, et cetera. Ainz checked whether the Elven city had any such traps in place.

(T/N: Raw had "guild home" in katakana, will assume that's a mistake until proven otherwise)

He would have to check again at the important-looking locations within the city, but it seemed like the ordinary parts of it weren't problematic.

He didn't want to spend too much time maintaining [Perfect Unknowable]. Considering the amount of mana he would be left with after this, he really didn't have much leeway.

Ainz gradually made the eye move into the deeper parts of the city. He wanted to find the Elves that resided in trees that corresponded to shops.

If he thought of it as a usual town, the shops should be clustered together in a convenient place to reach. Considering that they also had to keep inventory on hand, it wouldn't be strange if they were located in the larger trees.

After a while, Ainz groaned silently.

"—I can't find them!"

This city, made out of thousands of trees, was nothing but a forest to the human eye. He couldn't find anything like a signboard because it was night and there were no nameplates on the trees either. It was just rows and rows of trees without any individual characteristics that he could see. He couldn't be sure that the tree he was looking at wasn't the same tree he saw just before.

If this was a human city, there would be a thoroughfare with shops arrayed on both sides. They could also be clustered around the main square.

He couldn't find any such places here at a glance. With his experience till now becoming useless, he had no choice but to search by intuition.

This was a city that was not at all welcoming to a traveler. It was hard—no, it was impossible to find his target amidst this.

That said, it was not like he needed to complete everything today. They shouldn't be hasty, but instead, take it slow and safe.

Even so, Ainz continued his search for a while after that. He had already activated [God's Eye] so he might as well use it until it ran out of duration.

But Ainz could only sigh after his long search.

—It's no use doing the same thing again when the residents are sleeping

He shouldn't do things without a plan. Even though it would be riskier, he should return to search in the morning. He would probably get a clue by observing the way people moved around. Ainz wasn't sure how long it would take to accomplish his goal if he didn't do that.

Ainz selected a random place and sent [God's Eye] in. Elves use the walkways between the trees to move around the entrances of their homes which would correspond to the first or second floor of a human house. So he decided to infiltrate from the first floor. It was the same principle as a thief looking through drawers. Starting from the second floor would make for terrible pathing.

After [God's Eye] passed through the wall, it flew up until it found elves sleeping on the third floor.

He found a father, mother, and two boys sleeping there. It seemed like this house belonged to a family.

I already heard about this but...how primitive...

The four of them were sleeping soundly on a large amount of leaves collected in what was supposedly a bedroom. Human villages also used dried grass in place of a mattress so maybe this was similar to that.

According to the elves in Nazarick, this was what a normal Elven bedroom looked like. Although it took a lot of work to collect a large amount of leaves, they could be used for a long time without any issues. When he asked them about being bitten by insects, they replied that a spell was cast on the leaves to prevent that.

The children—the two boys were pleasantly sleeping with slow, calm breaths.

“Sleep, huh...how did it use to feel like?”

A long time had passed since he gained this body. This body's lack of the three basic needs and its insensitivity to pain was probably the reason he managed to not collapse till now, but he still felt some regret about it. When he sees such pleasant sleeping faces, he feels nostalgic and a bit envious. Even more so when

he sees tasty food.

Good grief...

Ainz shrugged and activated [Greater Teleportation], arriving in front of a large curtain made of vines.

It was not weird to see such veils made of vines in the forest, but if one looked at this curtain closely, they would find that it was skillfully hiding a small cottage behind it.

This had been their party's temporary base for these past few days, a Green Secret House created by a magic item.

Fenrir, who was sitting beside the Green Secret House, slowly stood up to sniff its surroundings, letting out a growl while looking—no, glaring in Ainz's direction.

But, his line of sight was a bit off.

Just like Aura back then, even Fenrir couldn't completely sense someone being hidden by [Perfect Unknowable]. Rather, it should be praised for the fact that it even managed to sense Ainz while he maintained [Perfect Unknowable].

Ainz canceled the spell.

Now that it could see Ainz, Fenrir bowed its head with a look of remorse on its face.

Although it couldn't talk, Fenrir was rather intelligent. Its act of bowing its head was not the instinctual act of a beast but clearly conveyed its apology to Ainz. But Ainz didn't think that Fenrir was at fault here.

From its point of view, he had been just some unknown intruder that suddenly appeared here. This was the natural reaction for a guard protecting its master; it would have been more problematic if it hadn't responded like that.

He had only brought this Fenrir with them instead of the usual Hanzos this time. Although Ainz said that he would take a lot of high-level underlings with him, he did not stay true to his words due to certain reasons. In the present situation, where he couldn't predict how his plan to obtain friends for the twins would work out, he didn't want to expose information to others if possible.

And the other reason.

He stopped allowing the Guardians to head out alone after Shalltear's brainwashing incident.

But what was the result? Even though Nazarick started being more active since then, the enemy didn't appear again. The only one who fell for the bait was a platinum-armored man named Riku Agnesia when Ainz—who was actually

Pandora's Actor—appeared alone. It was like the enemy who brainwashed Shalltear didn't exist at all.

That was why.

Since he managed to fish out Riku when there were no Hanzos around, maybe the enemy had a way to detect the presence of the Hanzos.

Perhaps it's some ability of a World Class Item.

Or perhaps with some kind of talent.

Therefore, he was performing a dangerous experiment by not bringing the Hanzos along.

He informed Albedo of this reason, but even Ainz could see that there were a lot of faults in his reasoning. She was persuaded by his spiel, smiling all the while, which made him doubt if she was really persuaded. Maybe he would get a talking to after he returns.

“—good work”

Ainz left Fenrir with a curt greeting, feeling a little somber. He then put his hand on the Green Secret House's door—so camouflaged that one couldn't find it without knowing that it was there beforehand—and pushed a little.

The door didn't move.

Unfortunately, as this magic item did not have a keyhole (though it could be forcibly opened by something like Epignoi), one had to request someone inside to open it once it was locked.

Ainz used the door knocker. One could look out from the Green Secret House by making the door translucent from the inside. After a few moments, he heard the door being unlocked.

And then it opened.

“Welcome home!”

“We-wel-come-come...home...”

The one who replied energetically was Aura. Mare slowly followed with his welcome, his eyes completely drowsy.

Both of them have changed into pajamas, Mare going as far as wearing a nightcap. Of course, this was the correct appearance given the time.

“Sorry for making you both wait so late into the night”

Ainz said as he entered.

The space inside was filled with a warm light and was far larger than one would expect from its outer appearance.

You would directly enter the living room from the door and you could see the

kitchen and other rooms from there. There were also 4 doors that were connected to the individual rooms.

“No, no, we expected it to take more time when we were informed that you could be late”

“I thought so as well, but...let’s not talk while standing here. Let’s sit over there”

He wanted to tell Aura that it was fine to go to sleep. But he should still share the gathered intel with them, even though it’s just a meager amount. Ainz didn’t put much trust in his ability to remember so it’s better to do it as soon as possible.

While feeling a bit guilty about making them go along with his selfish reasons, he invited them into the living room to talk about what he saw.

Sitting on the chairs there, he found Aura looking attentive in contrast to Mare, who already dropped his head onto the backrest with his eyes half closed. He looked like he would go to sleep any time now. Ainz felt even more guilty when he compared them to the sleeping children from before.

Am I not being considerate about those who need sleep because I don’t need any? This is bad...

“Why don’t we let Mare go to bed? I won’t mind if you informed him about our talk in the morning”

“Good grief...” Aura slapped Mare’s head. “Wake up. You are being rude to Ainz-sama, you know?”

“Fuaah, oh, W-welcome back”

Mare gave a small bow. Ainz couldn’t mock that they already went through that.

“This child, really” Aura was getting angry at Mare’s attitude

“It’s not good to force someone to stay awake. It can affect tomorrow’s opera—”

Ainz shut his mouth suddenly, remembering himself from his YGGDRASIL days.

Of course, he believed that it didn’t affect his office work, but was that really the case? Also, it was different when you did it to entertain yourself versus when you were made to do so for others’ convenience.

Ainz—Suzuki Satoru used to complain when he had to stay late because of his boss.

First of all, he shouldn’t be comparing children to adults, but it could also be

considered wrong to compare a child with the astounding physical ability of a level 100 NPC to an ordinary adult like Suzuki Satoru.

The two of them stared at Mare, whose eyes—half-closed from drowsiness—looked like he was glaring at them.

Mare's head suddenly slid, causing him to panic with his eyes wide open. He then returned his head to its previous position.

He was nearly at his limit.

“—Well then. Let's do it like this. Mare can go to sleep to not affect tomorrow's work. His wits will become dull if you forcefully keep him awake and that's not a good thing. Can you inform him in the morning about what we will talk about here like asked before?”

She should have immediately agreed to Ainz's orders. Instead, she made a complicated expression, probably thinking that Mare's behavior was too slovenly for a Guardian. However, it was just for a moment. She deeply bowed, as if she just persuaded herself in her mind.

“...Understood. I will immediately take Mare back to his room. ...Can you stand?”

“Uh, uhhh?”

He can't even give a legible response to Aura, so standing is out of the question.

“—Hmmm. Let me carry him”

Aura looked like she wanted to say something, but Ainz ignored her, stood up, and lifted Mare in his arms.

Perhaps because Mare had changed into pajamas and was only minimally equipped, he found Mare to be quite light. No, normal children probably only weighed about this much.

It would have been harder if he was fully equipped, though it's not like I couldn't carry him even then... That thing is really heavy...perhaps the heaviest of all of the Guardians' equipment

(T/N: Probably talking about Mare's staff)

Since both of his hands—he could have carried him with one hand if he wanted to—were occupied, he let Aura go before him to open the door. He entered Mare's room and let him down slowly onto the bed.

He had already closed his eyes and was taking slow calm breaths. He probably started sleeping while he was in Ainz's arms.

Ainz silently exited the room, taking care not to make any sounds. Aura followed him even more silently, as expected of a Ranger.

Both of them returned to the living room and took their seats again.

Immediately, Aura bowed her head and started speaking, “please forgive us for taking a rest while Ainz-sama is working so hard. I apologize on Mare’s behalf. You’d be right to be angry and feel uneasy about his work ethic as a Guardian, but let me assure you that we would usually equip items to remove our need for sleep if we have work to do at night and you wouldn’t see such a slovenly appearance from us. If you were to ask us why we didn’t do so today it’s because our strength in battles would be reduced a bit as equipping the item meant leaving out our battle-focused equipment. So we decided not to equip the item as we will be standing on guard to protect Ainz-sama...”

Aura quickly explained. He could feel her anxiety peeking through her uncharacteristic way of talking.

“No, no, you don’t have to worry so much. We are here on vacation after all. There’s nothing wrong with sleeping early. More importantly, what about you, Aura? Don’t you feel sleepy?”

“Ah, no, I would never show you such an unbecoming appearance like that—”

“—too stiff, too stiff. I am not feeling angry at all. Rather, I feel happy that I got to see a different side of Mare, you know? You people always end up being too formal in front of me. I now feel extremely curious about how others behave normally. —Like say, how about Cocytus?”

“...there’s not much difference from the normal Cocytus”

Aura returned to her normal expression.

“I see. In that case, should I secretly have a look using [Perfect Unknowable] while he is alone?”

Ainz subtly smiled—although his face didn’t show it, his voice probably relayed his feelings—and Aura too joined in with a smile akin to that of a pranking kid.

“Well then, are you sure you don’t want to sleep?”

“I am usually awake around this time so I don’t really feel that sleepy”

According to her, it was common for her to stay awake late into the night to play with those of her monsters that were nocturnal. This “playing” seemed to be important for beast tamers as the monsters would build up stress and wouldn’t operate at full potential if they skipped it. That said, it was not like she was reducing the amount of time she spent sleeping. She just slept late into the day following the night she stayed awake. So, it was something similar to a night shift.

By the way, if any of the twins had to head outside of Nazarick, they would

equip the aforementioned item to skip sleep and stay alert.

hnn—What should I do about this? It's natural that the persons in charge would be working hard but shouldn't the races that need sleep be better off sleeping? Especially children who need a good rest for their growth. Maybe I should discuss it with Albedo...that aside!

After he took a breath, Ainz talked about the Theocracy's camp he saw in The Great Sea of Trees, though he did not manage to figure out their troop strength or how far away they were from reaching the Elven capital. It was just enough to know their armies were still advancing. Coming to blows with the Theocracy is not a part of Ainz's present mission.

Then, he started explaining the more important matter of his exploration of the Elves' Royal Capital.

He talked about everything that happened without hiding anything. There was no use in hiding such matters. He just had to be honest when something was impossible. Also, Aura was different from *those* two. Maybe she would take his words as they were and give him better ideas about how to proceed.

"Is that so..." Aura, who heard his explanation, nodded slightly. "In that case, we should observe them during the day just as Ainz-sama says"

"Aah. I am planning to do so but what are you two going to do during that time?"

"About that... it's better If I...don't infiltrate, right?"

"You are right. I think there's a very low chance of you getting discovered but we still don't have enough information to be sure. It's better not to leak who we really are in the present situation"

"In that case, I will talk with Mare tomorrow about his task. But, I am planning on cooperating with Ainz-sama. How about I investigate the surroundings of that city to find any tracks left by the Elves?"

Ainz nodded in agreement.

If goods were being transported to the Royal Capital, they should leave some kind of trail behind, however faint. The more used trails are no different from roads.

If they managed to find them, they could also expect to find places frequented by the Elves like the Elven settlements at the other end of the road.

All of this rested on the assumption that the Elves didn't use something like [Forestwalker], but Aura's idea was very good. There wasn't a single reason for Ainz to object to it.

“It’s a splendid idea. To search all the areas around...would probably not even take a day for you. Work with Mare to search for any trails left behind by them. I’ll be relying on you”

“Okay! Understood!”

“In that case, I will once again conduct some intelligence gathering during noon tomorrow—actually it’s today, considering the time”

“Then I will conduct the search at night because I feel like it’s easier to get noticed in the day”

“Umu, I will leave it to you. Well then, let us go to bed as well...Good night, Aura”

“Okay. Good night, Ainz-sama”

Ainz stood up along with Aura.

He went separate ways from Aura to the room designated to him, entered it, and laid on the bed. But Ainz didn’t need to sleep because he is an undead. He ended up taking out a book from the item box.

It was one of the books on management he had been reading a lot, titled “To become a good leader.” To be frank, he didn’t feel like reading these books was helping him, but it was probably better than not reading them at all.

Ainz started turning over the pages.



Ainz was in a daze for a while. He wasted two precious scrolls on infiltration on the first night and the noon of the second day. Only on the noon of the third day did Ainz finally manage to find important intel. That being said, the only things he found were the trees with shops, but this did let him get a sense for the capital’s layout.

It was just a small step for others but a giant leap for Ainz. He was so happy that his emotional suppression was triggered. Therefore, he resolved not to waste this chance. Ainz made sure to remember the route to the shop.

He retreated at that point. There was certainly still some active duration left for the spell. Although he felt extremely curious, wanting to send the [God’s Eye] over to the awfully wide and large tree that was the royal castle and take a peek, he managed to control himself.

In human civilizations, kings were not always the strongest beings around.

This was probably for two reasons. One was that it would be hard for humans to prosper if they followed the strongest instead of the ones who could make better decisions. It was the survival method of a species that was nothing but prey for the other races, who were weaker than the others but also more populous. The other reason was that they occupied comparatively safer areas. That was what was special about the Kingdom, the Empire, and the Holy Kingdom.

However, for the races who lived in a land that required clashing blades with other races, it was natural to have the strongest of them be the king.

The Elf king was then probably a strong person. In that case, they should not invite meaningless danger after going through all this trouble to be careful.

He had collected various pieces of information on this world until now, but he had yet to meet a strong being that could match him and wasn't a monster. Maybe if he hadn't met that mysterious warrior called Riku, he would have been careless and would have looked down on the Elf king. Instead, meeting Riku made him more cautious than ever before.

He dispersed the eye and cast [Greater Teleportation].

Ainz returned to their base and exchanged the intel he found with the two (Mare with his eyes completely open this time), who had just returned earlier.

He was informed that although they had wasted the second day before realizing the Elves were using the trees to travel, they finally found success in finding multiple trails. It might take different amounts of time to investigate them depending on the distance to the nearest settlement on those roads.

Ainz expressed his unease about being seen by the Elves using those roads if they decided to investigate them.

In response, Aura said that they would travel along the road on the ground with Fenrir. She confidently proclaimed that as long as they were inside the forest, they would not get discovered. She was so sure of her opinion that it made Ainz think his worries were unfounded. Even so, Ainz did not give his go-ahead for the moment. Instead, he requested them to wait for a while longer. He would likely be getting his hands on some good intel today.

And so, on the night of the third day.

Ainz approached the Elven royal capital again using [Perfect Unknowable]. Naturally, he infiltrated from a different spot, one he hadn't visited before. He couldn't guarantee that he didn't leave any marks behind on his previous incursions that some excellent ranger among the Elves managed to notice.

He always moved using [Fly] so as to not leave any marks behind, but that was

just from Ainz's point of view who was a layman when it came to stealth and search. He was not confident enough to proclaim that he didn't break any branches or make the leaves bend in strange directions on his way here.

Honestly, I sometimes wonder why I am being so careful... but it would be bothersome if the nearby Elven villages started thinking that some mysterious entity was prowling around. It would be especially troublesome if they were to be captured by Theocracy and then leak that information to them

It was highly unlikely that this "mysterious entity" would be traced back to the Sorcerer Kingdom, but letting the Theocracy know that there was a third faction nearby would be bad. He was afraid of how the Theocracy would react to that intel. Their unanticipated reaction could throw his plans into disarray.

...It wouldn't be a bad idea to pause this now and have a discussion with Albedo and Demiurge, but if I were to do that, my plans for Aura and Mare to make friends would be disturbed.

Therefore, the only option left to Ainz was to be as careful as possible.

Ainz took out a scroll and quickly activated it. He didn't hesitate because he was sure there would be concrete results to show for it this time.

"Good!" Ainz whispered after infiltrating the target's Elf Tree with [God's Eye].

His target was sleeping, buried in a mountain of leaves. It was a male elf.

Elves were fundamentally a slender race, shorter by about 10 to 20 percent when compared to humans. In addition to that, they barely had any body hair and didn't grow beards. As they also looked like young adults for a long period of their life, it was extremely hard to estimate their age from their external appearance alone. Most of them look far younger than their real age.

Therefore Ainz was not certain that this elf held the information that he wanted, but there was a reason Ainz chose him as his target despite that.

It was because there the elf lives here alone.

Abducting an entire family would cause trouble later, but it was easy if it was just a single person.

He also had another reason, but that can only be confirmed later.

As he already memorized the route, Ainz directly teleported over with [Greater Teleportation].

The elf didn't wake up at Ainz's intrusion. Rather, it was a given that he wouldn't even be able to sense Ainz unless he was a high-level ranger.

Ainz then cast the fourth-tier spell [Charm Species] on him.

The spell triggered without fail thanks to him being asleep and the large gap between their levels.

“Wake up,” Ainz spoke to him.

His [Perfect Unknowable] was dispelled the moment he cast a spell with the intent to harm (or to be more precise in gaming terms, if his magic triggers some resistance). He continued to wake him while shaking his shoulders gently with his hands, being careful not to cause him pain.

“...nnah?”

The elf mumbled like an idiot but it couldn’t be helped as he was just woken up now.

“Don’t resist, ok?”

Ainz ended with that and activated [Greater Teleportation] while he held the elf’s hand.

This spell allowed one to teleport with other people, but they had to be in agreement and not resist the teleportation. It worked here because the “charmed” status was considered as agreement. The “dominated” status should also work in the same way, but he didn’t use this harder-to-resist and higher-tier option because he was on guard against certain things.

This kidnapping was perfect in execution. You could even call him a first-class criminal.

Good. Just like I planned!

Of course he would be happy because his plan was going so smoothly. While he had a wide smile on his bony face—

“—Wah! W-what the hell? What is this?”

Upon seeing the sudden change in his surroundings and feeling the ground underneath him, the elf jerked up and turned completely awake. He didn’t look like he was still thinking that this was a dream. Or maybe the Elves didn’t have the concept of a dream world in the first place.

“Don’t make such a loud voice”

“E-even if you told me not to...”

“I used teleportation magic. Calm down. There’s no one here who would harm you”

“T-teleportation magic?”

The elf continued to panic silently. The only reason he stopped was because the charm magic was still in effect.

“Well, we are here”

Ainz opened the half-opened door completely and led the elf into the Green Secret House.

Aura and Mare should be observing them from the gaps of their rooms' slightly opened doors.

He also thought about letting the captive see them, who were Dark Elves, in hopes that it would make him speak more freely. But considering the troubles that this might end up causing in the future, he decided not to.

Although the Dark Elves weren't considered enemies by the three captured elves, the situation could be different now. Maybe Dark Elves were now considered enemies in the Royal Capital.

Of course, it wouldn't be a problem if Ainz said "they are not enemies" to him.

"What is this place...Don't tell me this is the World of the Divine Tree..."

Ainz didn't know a thing about this World of the Divine Tree, but he could guess that it was probably something from their myths and legends. Or, perhaps—

Is it related to some player from YGGDRASIL? There's a need to investigate, but...I don't want to spend too much time here. I will do it sometime later.

Ainz made him sit on a sofa in the living room and took a memo pad out. It contained a list of bullet points with the questions he needed to ask. He couldn't waste any time. If something failed in the process, he would have to kill the guy. Although it was extremely unlikely, someone suddenly disappearing from the Royal Capital could still cause problems in the future.

"Tell this friend of yours about various things you know, in as few words as possible," Ainz continued without waiting for his reply, "is there a possibility that you will die if someone used magic or other means to get information from you?"

"Huh? No way there's going to be anything like that on me right?"

The guy looked like he had no idea what Ainz was talking about, but there was a possibility that the elf just didn't know even if there was such a trap.

If I remember correctly, it took three questions before it was activated that time...

Ainz took such scenarios into account while he prepared the questions in the memo, so he just needed to go through the list from top to bottom.

"Do you know any Dark Elf village's location?"

"...I don't know the exact place, but I do know their general location in the great forest"

It sounded like it was further south from the Royal Capital. He went into more detail, saying that it was in a place called The Three Trees, where the trees were

huge. But, Ainz couldn't make any sense of it as he didn't know the layout of this area.

He would have to rely on Aura, who was listening in.

"Continuing to the next question.."

When he was making this memo, the twins were surprised that he didn't include this question. Now that he thought about it, it did look important so he moved on to the third question.

"—Tell me what you know about the Theocracy"

"The Theocracy...haa, that horrid country of humans! Those shitheads are attacking us for no reason at all! A country without honor, that attacked us while we were unaware, a bunch of wretches who kidnapped hundreds of Elves," so started the guy's denunciation of the Theocracy, which continued on with vigor until Ainz stopped him in a fluster.

But it did seem like the guy, who was only a commoner, didn't know how far the Theocracy had advanced. He wasn't even sure if the Elves were winning or losing. However, seeing the patrols moving in a tense mood compared to before, the common opinion among the Elves was that the situation was not good.

Three questions were asked, but there was no indication of anything happening to the elf. As he thought, that time was an exception. In that case, he could ask the elf everything he wanted to hear about, but he couldn't really spend that much time with him.

"How are the relations between the Elves and the Dark Elves? They aren't bad right?"

"Not really...I think?" Before Ainz could ask him the reason for the slight pause, the elf started speaking again, "I don't dislike them and I don't think those around me have any bad feelings about the dark elves either. For us, they are like some kind of distant relatives. But, this is only about how we feel and we don't know how the other side thinks about us, you know? We rarely meet them so I don't have a clue about what their feelings are."

"Do you know anything about the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

"What's that?"

Instant reply. Well, he expected this so he wasn't surprised. Anyway, he determined that nothing in the information acquired just now constituted a hindrance for the plan to make friends for the twins.

"That's all I wanted to ask. —I am grateful"

"It's all good, aren't we friends?"

Ainz unintentionally smiled mirthlessly at the guy's reply. He was planning on making friends for others, but when the same word was pointed at him, it rang hollow. For Ainz, only his guildmates could ever be called his friends.

"That's it then."

Mare popped his head out of the door behind the elf when Ainz sent him a signal. Ainz continued to talk with the guy to divert his attention, "I also wanted to know more about things like Elven culture, but I can't spend too much time on—"

He saw the elf's eyes become drowsy and then he fell sideways onto the sofa.

The elf was taking slow, calm breaths that were a mark of deep sleep. This sudden turn of events was caused by Mare's [Sandman's Sand].

Ainz made Aura, who was following Mare, confirm that the elf was asleep.

"...Aura. Do you think we can reach the Dark Elves' village using what this guy said?"

"I feel like I can, probably. But I might need to conduct a detailed recon when we are near it to find the exact location"

That was good enough for him. Ainz cast [Control Amnesia] on the elf.

This was the main reason why he kidnapped—selected—an elf living alone.

Since it was hard to estimate an elf's age, he couldn't be sure that he would get an adult with all of the knowledge he required even if he kidnapped a mature-looking elf. There was a chance the elf would end up being a very young person who never stepped outside of the Royal Capital.

On the other hand, he could be sure if he kidnapped an elf with children, but then there would be as many untied ends as there were members in that elf's family to deal with later.

If he killed them all just because it was bothersome, it would mean that an entire family would have disappeared from the capital, without any signs of resistance to boot. That would surely create problems for them. He probably couldn't make it look like they had escaped away during the night due to debt or something.

And there was no way his mana could last long enough to cast [Control Amnesia] on a whole family like he was doing now.

Therefore, he selected a male elf who lived alone.

Ainz removed the elf's memories in a single move. Fine manipulation of memories, making sure that the details stayed consistent, was difficult. However, removing them in batches without caring much for the details was not that hard

at all.

Plus, the memories he needed to erase didn't span across that much time. This was the reason why he tried to take as little time as possible for his questions. If he didn't need to erase the elf's memories with [Control Amnesia], Ainz would have spent as much time as possible—maybe even until the charm ended or even longer by recasting [Charm Species]—to question him.

Since he controlled the number of questions and was done with the questioning in a short time, he easily managed to delete the memories up till the moment he went to sleep. No, he even ended up erasing a bit more, to the time just before the elf went to bed.

This was caused by him wiping a bunch of memories at once, but his MP probably wouldn't have lasted otherwise. Speaking in hindsight, his remaining MP actually looked like it would have held, but hindsight was hindsight.

He couldn't do anything about it now, so even if the elf had some doubts, he just had to hope that the elf would reason it out by himself.

His MP was low, but because they managed to complete the task without an issue by preparing meticulously, he was left with enough to complete the remaining tasks.

"I'm leaving then. Aura and Mare, can you lend me a hand just like we planned?"

"Okay! Leave it to me!"

"Ah, Y-yes. I will do my best"

Aura and Mare held the elf's limbs, swinging him while they carried him with Ainz at their lead. Considering their strength, one would have been enough to carry the elf but if he was hit by something and it was considered as damage, he may wake up. Then Ainz would have to cast [Control Amnesia] again and he was not sure that his remaining MP was enough for that.

Of course—

—I made a different plan for that scenario so it shouldn't be a problem.

Ainz first exited the Green Secret House by himself and activated [Perfect Unknowable]. He opened a [Gate] after that.

Naturally, on the other side of the gate was this elf's house.

Ainz first entered the gate alone and entered the elf's bedroom. He immediately started looking around while trying to listen for any sounds.

...Fuuuuuh. It's safe.

It seemed like there was no one around to be alarmed by the sudden [Gate].

For a moment Ainz continued to listen carefully, observing the situation.

...Looks like...there's no problem.

A ranger on Aura's level could stay silent without letting Ainz hear anything, but it was not like even someone like Aura was doing it at all times. It would be like some farce out of a dark comedy if a veteran ranger existed who, in this short time, managed to notice something was wrong in this house and laid in wait expecting something to occur again. So, Ainz could only assume that it was safe.

Ainz dispelled [Perfect Unknowable] and stuck his head into the gate to send a signal to the twins. They carried the man, swinging by his limbs, through the gate.

The three of them executed their plan in silence.

First, Aura and Mare carefully laid the man on his bed made of leaves. It would be too idiotic if he were to receive damage now and end up waking.

[Sandman's Sand] caused a deeper sleep than [Sleep]. One would wake up from just a shake for [Sleep] but wouldn't open their eyes unless they receive damage if it was [Sandman's Sand].

If they left him like this and if no one discovered him and woke him up by causing damage to him, he would gradually die from emaciation. The uproar that would cause was not something Ainz wanted after going through all this trouble to not create any such disturbances.

They started preparing to wake the guy up after letting him down on the bed. Ainz looked around the room, trying to find the object he saw when he entered it.

It was a weird (at least he didn't find it ordinary) wooden sculpture with a bulging stomach that looked like the cross between a mole and a frog. They didn't find any such animals in the few days they had spent in the forest. Maybe it was a mythical beast from Elven mythology and legends. Ainz took that sculpture into his hands.

As I expected, it's wood. But...it's heavier than I expected. Not bad...but if it ends up killing him...well, there's nothing I can do about that

It's very unlikely that they would suspect Ainz's involvement even if they started a murder investigation.

Upon seeing Ainz with the sculpture, the twins carried the elf under the shelf where the sculpture was.

After Ainz gave them a nod, the two went first into the [Gate]. Ainz followed them and stopped just in front of it.

He then threw the strange sculpture into the air.

This was the best he could do to not cause a suspicious death that would trouble him later.

Ainz immediately entered the [Gate] without waiting for the sculpture to hit and dispelled the [Gate] without a second thought.

“Good. I will go get the final confirmation. Wait for a bit, both of you.”

“Okay! Understood! Only a little more, right? Good luck, Ainz-sama!”

“Ah, I-I think it should be f-fine if it’s Ainz-sama but...p-please take care because I t-think that your mana could be low”

Receiving the twins’ encouragement, Ainz recast [Perfect Unknowable] and used [Greater Teleportation] to appear in the elf’s room again.

“Shit! That’s painful! Why the hell would it fall on its own?! First of all, why am I sleeping in such a place?! Did I drink...I feel like I didn’t... Shit, that’s painful...”

Ainz looked at the wide-awake elf, who was taking his rage out on the shelf. He smiled at the elf, who was becoming more and more tearful from the pain.

Nicely done! A perfect crime!

The elf didn’t look like he was acting and he also didn’t seem to suspect anything. —No, it looked like he did have suspicions about the sculpture falling on him, but he probably didn’t think that some strange person came into his room and threw it on him.

“...Wait a minute”

Ainz stopped before he could activate [Greater Teleportation] as he heard the suspicion in the elf’s voice.

Did he notice something? Maybe not pinned on us, but still that there’s an intruder? Was there some kind of monitoring equipment—magic item here because it’s a shop? I didn’t find any though...

“...Is Tsungoga-sama trying to tell me something?”

Tsungoga-sama? I don’t remember any such monsters in YGGDRASIL...

“Tsungoga-sama. Tsungoga-sama. Please speak if there’s anything I should know”

The elf kneeled on the floor, his head to the ground and the sculpture in his hands held high. That was the model pose of devotion a highly religious person would take.

...so it’s just the native religion? That aside, why does this guy talk to himself so much? Is he intentionally doing this because he thinks that there’s someone around? Or is he

just simply praying to this god called Tsungoga?

The elf seemed to be a different person from the one they kidnapped and used. Ainz hesitated for a moment about whether or not he should kidnap the elf again and kill him, but he ended up deciding not to. For now, it was more likely that he was just praying, but it was still better to be on guard. Ainz wanted to leave something behind to monitor him if possible, but that would be difficult even for Ainz. There was no convenient spell for that. The most he could do was to use magic to check in at times.

Ainz clicked his tongue—although he didn't have one—and returned to Green Secret House using [Greater Teleportation].

The twins, who were waiting for him, smiled when Ainz dispelled [Perfect Unknowable] and gave him a thumbs up. Honestly, he was a bit uneasy about the elf's behavior at the end, but since they couldn't do anything about it, he chose not to tell the twins in case they turn uneasy.

(T/N: Ainz appears to be parodying a stereotypical manager on a business trip for the following section)

“Okay, everyone. Thank you for your cooperation with everything so far. With that, today's work is done.” The twins looked puzzled at Ainz's exaggerated action, but immediately smiled again. “As it is getting late, please turn in early so that you won't feel exhausted tomorrow.”

The twins replied with an energetic “Okay!”.

“With that, although the day has already changed, I will now decide the time we should be waking up at. Yes—I don't mind you waking up whenever you want, but don't go sleeping until noon now you hear? Right-o. If you wake up by 9 o'clock, I will bring you our breakfast from Nazarick”

They answered with a loud “Okay!”. While Aura slightly poked Mare with her elbow, it didn't look like she was bullying him.

“Okay, with that—thanks for the hard work everyone!”

Upon hearing Ainz's words, the two of them also followed with, “thanks for your hard work!”.

“Well then, that's all folks!”

3

They set off, heading towards the Dark Elf village.

Relying on what that elf had said, they raced across the ground on Fenrir's back. If they could have discovered their target from the sky, they would have headed there without stopping, but unfortunately, it couldn't be discovered even with Aura's talents.

It was hard to breathe as they ran through the forest—it was as if Ainz were being smacked in the face by air that had absorbed the very greenery. That characteristic, and extremely potent on top of that, scent of a forest made his nasal cavity tremble. It may have just been Ainz's imagination, but he could feel that it was different from the air in The Great Forest of Tob. If it weren't just his imagination alone, then though this world may resemble YGGDRASIL, there were major differences, and it was brimming with various other changes.

As he idly mused over this, the urge of wanting to travel all over this vast world put just a little thrill in his heart.

If the average Joe was to proceed down the pathless path through The Great Sea of Trees with its dangling vines, jumble of trees, and more impeding them, it would obviously be impossible to proceed in a straight line. Before they knew it, they would find themselves heading in a completely different direction.

From what they had heard from the man, the distance to the Dark Elf village was about a week's travel.

Although the Elves were adapted to the forests, if they could progress 15 kilometers a day within this Sea of Trees, they would be doing well. Based on that, the villages would be separated by about 100 kilometers. Ainz and company covered that distance on foot in a little over an hour. If it hadn't been necessary for them to check their surroundings, they would have arrived even faster.

That was just how incredible Fenrir was. Fenrir's ability, [Forestwalker], had been particularly useful because all the trees, dense thickets, and such moved as if they were avoiding Fenrir; thus, they were able to travel in an approximately straight line. No matter how great Fenrir himself was, they shouldn't have been able to have come this far on foot in such a short amount of time had it not been for [Forestwalker].

But—

"I think it's somewhere around here..."

Aura, who was sitting in front of Ainz, tilted her head in confusion.

Since Elven villages were constructed using trees, it was rather difficult to find one in the middle of a forest. Of course, this was the exact reason why their civilization developed to use trees to construct their villages. The Royal Capital of the Elves, with all its surrounding trees cut down, was the exception to this.

That being said, it should have been impossible for it to have been so cleverly hidden that Aura—a ranger with high-ranking abilities in her own right—couldn't find it. Since it was difficult to imagine that they had just failed to notice it on the path they took to get here, they might not have reached their target village yet.

"As long as we weren't mistaken about the distance to our destination, there's no problem. If anything, it would be a problem if we got too close."

Ainz touched the mask he had equipped with his hand. "I want us to find the village before they find us. I want information on them, so we're going to conceal ourselves somewhere we won't be found."

What he was most scared of was that they had come to a completely wrong place. However, he wasn't really worried about that being the case.

Of course, if one were to tell him to go into a place without a single point of reference (like the Sea of Trees) without any hesitation, Ainz would absolutely not be able to do that. The directions he got from the elf were: "once you've gone about 2500 paces there will be a huge boulder, and from there turn in the direction where three trees are standing in a row, advancing around 3000 paces," and so on. Ainz thought his explanation was less than crystal clear.

But not to Aura.

Certainly, there had been occasions when even Aura was confused and had to search the surrounding area, but she was still mostly confident and had guided them this far.

Were rangers always this amazing, or is it just Aura who's amazing...

He hadn't felt it as much when they were making their way to the Dwarven Kingdom, but this trip had led Ainz to conclude mentally that this would have been impossible without a ranger accompanying them.

Even YGGDRASIL had this kind of dense forest, but in hindsight, they were still adjusted for the Players. He didn't think a real jungle would be this formidable.

But on the flip side, it was just a fact that this experience had a certain excitement to it.

Out in these backwater regions...if anything were to happen...I can totally understand that desire for the unknown... The World Searchers, huh...

Explorers were those who pursued that excitement. The figure of a true adventurer that Ainz sought.

Throw it all away and walk around exploring this world, eh...

Finding himself idly considering such things once again, Ainz shook his head. There was no way he could do such a thing. It was an act that would never be permitted for Ainz Ooal Gown, the Supreme Ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

However—maybe it would be allowed if it was just for a little bit. Not abandoning Nazarick, but taking a paid vacation like he was this time.

Come on, I'm just thinking about the same thing over and over again. Honestly, I guess I can't claim that it doesn't come from the desire to drop this heavy baggage and run away... In the end, am I just going around in circles without any development? Am I incapable of growth because I'm an undead? Or is it because I am me? When I think about that, all I can do is sigh... Haaa. Well, there's no point in thinking about unhappy things. Anyway...this time is with Aura and Mare, but how about I bring Cocytus and Demiurge along if there's a next time?... I haven't brought them along since that one time..

Ainz recalled when they acquired the land ship at the Katze Plains.

Okay! Let's get rid of those pessimistic thoughts and think positively. If I were to go on the same kind of journey again, it would be pretty rough doing it without a ranger, but trying to overcome that challenge through wisdom and insight might be pretty entertaining.

It was precisely because Aura was here this time that they were able to make it this far in good shape, but it was a little disappointing that this meant Ainz hadn't done anything at all.

Of course, he could just butt in and say he'll handle things himself. If he did,

Aura would probably be considerate and step aside for him. If Ainz were to make a mistake, she would surely think of something to help him while being careful not to offend him. However—

—Oh god, anything but that. Because I already feel like I'm getting in the way of running the Sorcerer Kingdom enough as it is!

Therefore, the best way to get what he wanted was to have an adventure without Aura. That way everyone could rack their brains together and have some fun. However, it should be noted that Ainz only thought of it this way because he had confidence that his powers could pull through during an adventure.

For example, if he was in some unknown place and lost his bearing, he could return from anywhere using [Teleport].

For example, even if some unknown magical beast came charging out of that thicket, he would be able to deal with it somehow, and even in the worst case, he could still flee back to Nazarick.

Sending adventurers out into the unknown world. That in and of itself wasn't a mistake. Even Ainzach, the guild master himself, endorsed it. However, it's not good to consider myself as the standard for an adventurer. Really, when I see Aura playing an active role in a place like this right before my eyes, I can feel the necessity of properly training up the adventurers.

It wasn't as if Ainz particularly wanted the adventurers to die.

We're conducting training in the Great Forest of Tob but...

The levels of danger in the Great Forest of Tob, which was under the complete control of Nazarick, and here were wildly different. It might not be a bad idea for the adventurers to gain experience at the Great Forest of Tob and hold the final exam here, but the circumstances surrounding that would require further discussions with Mare.

“Uh, um, Ainz-sama?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry Aura. It seems I got a little wrapped up in my own thoughts. So, what did you need?”

“Ah, well, what do we do now?”

Ainz looked up at the sky. He couldn't see it through the green leaves growing in abundance on the branches. However, the red-tinged sun casting its light over the earth was more than enough for him to know what time it was.

“Hrm. The same as last time, we secure a place that is hard to find and separated from the activity area of the Dark Elves, or any other intelligent life, and that's where we'll stay.”

“Understood! Well then, could you grant me a little time?”

“Of course,” Ainz replied and Aura nimbly jumped off Fenrir. However, just as Aura looked like she was about to dash off, Ainz hurried to call for her to stop.

“Wait, Aura. Take Fenrir along with you. You don’t need to worry about us waiting here. I’ll summon a monster as a substitute for Fenrir. Right, Mare?”

“Y-yes, Ainz-sama.”

Mare, who was behind Ainz, answered in a fluster. In other words, starting from Fenrir’s head, Aura, Ainz, and Mare were riding on his back in that order.

Because they could sense anyone that approached them with Fenrir’s powers of perception, Ainz and Mare were extremely grateful for him being there since they lacked those abilities. However, if that was the case, it meant that Aura would have to act alone.

It would be one thing if she had spells that summoned monsters like Ainz did, but Aura didn’t have that ability. He was worried about sending her out into this unknown land without a shield. Using a magic item as a substitute was one way to deal with this, but it required one action in order to summon a monster. When he took into consideration things like time limits and such, he didn’t consider it to be a good move.

I think I’m worrying about it too much, but Aura will finish her job quicker by taking Fenrir along.

Aura displayed an attitude like she was going to say something, but she responded, “Understood.” And so, Ainz and Mare dismounted, she got back on Fenrir, and then she took off. The figures of a girl and a wolf immediately disappeared into the trees of the forest and became invisible.

“Now then, Mare. Let’s conceal ourselves in this area as inconspicuously as we can so that we won’t be found. Someone finding us here would put all of Aura’s hard work to waste.”

“Y-yes. Uh, umm, so then, we’re going to use Green Secret House?”

“That will be fine, but before that there’s one thing we have to take care of.”

If Ainz were alone, [Perfect Unknowable] would be the most effective solution, but he couldn’t cast that spell on others. On top of that, Mare couldn’t use it so it was necessary for them to take completely different measures, which was why monster summoning was mentioned earlier.

Ainz took a small statue out of his Inventory—it was a magic item.

Statue of the Magical Beast • Cerberus.

A magic item from the same creator as the Statue of the Animal • Warhorse that he had once used before. Fully engraved right down to the bulges of the muscles, brimming with the feeling of movement, it was a magnificent piece and like a work of art.

When Ainz used it, it instantly swelled up and the magical beast appeared.

What appeared was, of course, Cerberus.

It could bite with its three dog and lion-like heads, scratch with its razor-sharp claws, and bite with its poisonous snake-like tail. All its attacks could also be imbued with fire damage, and it possessed complete resistance to flame and poison. It was a large, high-ranked magical beast with considerable combat abilities.

That strength could be better understood when speaking in the terms of monsters that could be summoned through [Summon Monster 10th].

Although, if it were against an Ainz-class Player, it would not be a very difficult monster for them to deal with. That said, there wasn't anything they could do about that.

A summoned monster's role was to attack an enemy's weak point, trigger traps, increase the number of available moves, or to simply serve as a shield. They were not meant to defeat other Players on their own.

Certainly, if Cerberus were continuously buffed through the use of a skill, it would be able to fight even better. For example, some of the undead that Ainz summoned were wearing Geta of Strength. And yet, if you compared them to Players with martial classes in the same level range, then no matter how unfavorable a comparison it was in terms of battle strength, so long as they were neither greatly mismatched nor some absurd build, one-on-one the Player would rarely lose.

The first reason Ainz had chosen Cerberus and not an Eyeball Corpse or other undead was because he had judged that a beast-type monster's sensory abilities would be higher.

And one more reason was because he had concluded that a monster with exceptional senses of smell and hearing rather than vision would excel in their role as a detector in the Sea of Trees.

Cerberus might lose to Fenrir in terms of levels, but in the end, he did have three heads. There was no doubt his sense of smell was also three times greater—probably.

“Wow.”

Mare said in surprise because a magical beast he was seeing for the first time had appeared in front of him. There was no way it could have been because he thought it looked strong.

“Come now, Cerberus. When you catch the scent of someone who is not one of us approaching, you will inform us, yes?”

“Grr,” the heads of Cerberus growled. It was a way of growling that let you feel their eagerness and confidence. Ainz, delighted by that “leave it to us” feeling that was coming across to him, showed his proud expression to Mare—though he probably couldn’t tell.

“Now then, from how many hundreds of meters away can you discern a scent?”

The Cerberus trio— or rather, the number of heads—stopped moving.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, shit” “Huh?” “Hold up” was the mood that was being transmitted, and the anxiety at “hundreds of meters?” was also coming across.

Even if that was what was coming across to him, Ainz could only react to it, and it was more than plausible that the truth was entirely different.

“—That’s right. You have three heads. You can do better than Fenrir, right?”

“Kuuun,” Cerberus cutely whined and flopped over to expose his belly.

Perhaps if it had been a puppy doing it, one would appreciate its cuteness and maybe even Ainz would have rubbed that defenseless belly. However, he was dealing with Cerberus. Bluntly speaking, it wasn’t cute. It was the same with that giant body, but his looks were far too grim.

As Ainz stared at Cerberus, Mare fussed over him and rubbed his belly.

“...Hm? What are you doing?”

While being mindful of Mare, who was rubbing his belly, Cerberus slowly got up, and with a determined expression growled, “I’ll do my best,” “I’ll do it,” “This is impossible,” in response to Ainz’s question. It seemed like there were three different sentiments coming across.

What Ainz focused on was that one-third of the sentiments were negative.

“...It’s fine if it’s too much for you, okay? It’s worse if you force yourself and fail...You can at least discern the scents around us and tell when a stranger is coming, right?”

Though Ainz himself had been the one to say it, he had also thought that maybe hundreds of meters was impossible after all.

“He-heh-heh...I can do at least that much.” “That’s possible.” “I can do that.” Ainz nodded at that feeling.

“Then get to it.”

Cerberus let out a howl. He sniffed at the scents around him.

Incidentally, Ainz could also give these orders without speaking. It was possible to give orders to summoned monsters even if spells like [Silence] were used. If you wanted to interfere with the connection between the summoner and the summoned, you would need the extremely niche class-build known as the Anti-Summoner Specialist. He gave orders verbally because he thought Mare wouldn't know what was happening if he and Cerberus were just staring at each other.

“Now then, next we will do as you said just a moment ago, Mare, let's create a Green Secret House and hide inside. It's best we are not seen by anyone.

“Yes!”

Mare looked pleased that his own suggestion had been accepted.

Actually, Mare's suggestion hadn't been off the mark.

Neither Ainz nor Mare possessed concealment techniques that could erase the traces of their passing. Therefore, if they were to carelessly wander around, they might leave behind signs, and if an expert outdoorsman saw them, he could tell where they were at a glance.

And so, it was wise for them to not move from this spot. Using magic like [Camouflage], that was available to druids and rangers, to keep quiet would have been best, but unfortunately, there wasn't anyone in this place that could use that magic. Mare certainly was a druid, but in reality, he was an extremely niche type of specialized druid. His magic itself was geared towards mass genocide, and if he didn't turn to items for help, he should have learned barely any of the common druidic magic, aside from a few buff-type spells.

Given all that, then bringing out the Secret Green House, and concealing their presence by hiding inside it—making a hiding place where they wouldn't create footprints or other signs of their being there by not moving around—was the correct answer after all.

Was it okay for just him to be taking it easy, even though Aura was working so hard?

No, of course, even Ainz knew the expression “the right man for the job.” He had a memory of looking it up when he heard it as one of the lines used when he had troublesome work forced on him in the past. And then he remembered Punitto Moe said, “A hard-working person's incompetence is the biggest pain in the ass of all.”

So this would be the right course of action.

But, if this was just him as the Sorcerer King leaving things to the Floor Guardian under his command, then there wasn't any problem with it at all. However—for what reason had Ainz begun this trip?

And the answer was because it was a paid vacation.

Moreover, he being the adult who first suggested it wasn't doing anything, and forcing the kids he had taken out with him to work, the guilt he felt was enormous.

Ainz became desperate and tried racking his brain, but he couldn't assist Aura with her work, and nothing came to mind about anything he should be doing here. About the only excuse he could come up with was that he was keeping Mare company.

Fooling myself by saying I'm taking care of a child...is just running away, huh? That's about the only...way to support Aura that I can come up with... So what do I do? Be respected for also doing the things I had to do...no, becoming an adult that carries out the bare minimum of their responsibilities?

Should he force himself to accept that what he couldn't discover right now was a role for him to play?

However much he thought about it, he couldn't come up with the perfect answer.

A despondent Ainz said to Mare.

“...Well then, let's wait inside the Green Secret House for Aura to get back.”

“Yes!”

Ainz felt like he had been saved just a little bit by the cheerful Mare's response.



There exists a magical beast called the Ankyloursus.

It looks like a bear from a distance, but if the difference is not quickly recognized, you can kiss your ass goodbye. It ranges from two to three meters in length. It has two pairs of, for a total of four, forelegs, and two hind legs. Sharp, pointed claws over 60 centimeters in length that are used exclusively for combat grow on two of the four forelegs, their hardness surpassing even that of steel. A long, thick tail extends from its lower back, at the end of which is a hammer-like swelling.

And finally, the majority of its body is protected by hard armor plates—that developed from scales. The power supporting that huge body is terrifying; a single attack unleashed by those hard, sharp claws and outstanding physical strength is easily able to bisect a person, armor and all.

However—that is all you should be wary of.

It is not as if it has any terrifying special abilities, nor can it employ any powerful magic. The Ankyloursus can only use the spell of [Fragrance], and that in and of itself is not something that can be used in combat. Therefore, while it is placed in the top ranks of predators in the Sea of Trees, it is by no means the strongest species.

However, there was one exception.

A being that was over four meters in length, and through just its physical abilities alone, could slaughter even monsters that had special abilities or could use magic.

It would not be strange for someone not in the know to mistake it for a different species if they saw it—it truly was an Ankyloursus that was worthy to be called a Lord.

It lifted its head from the stomach of the animal that it had been gobbling up until just now and let out a low, heavy bass growl that would fill the hearts of those who heard it with terror. Long entrails spilled out from the corner of its mouth.

Huffing and puffing it expelled breath wet with blood, and sniffed at the air. Its face was wet with blood, but it was able to sense that there were two scents it had never smelled before. Since they were intermingling with each other it was a mating pair, possibly.

Its belly was already full.

It would be fine to ignore them.

However—that was walking away from the discomfort.

This area was its territory. There was no way in hell it would allow someone to walk around like they owned the place.

It stood up on its hind legs, and after using its claws to scratch away the bark it rubbed its body against a tree. This was to clearly demonstrate that this was its territory, and then it walked off towards the source of the scent.

Along the way, it used [Fragrance]. Through this, it was able to erase its own body odor and the scent of blood that still clung to it. By doing this the huge body of the Ankyloursus approached its prey. If it didn't do that in this forest,

capturing prey would be rather difficult.

The scent grew stronger.

There were no indications that they had noticed it. If it had been noticed, they would be acting differently. For example, standing still and searching for a sound. Or otherwise trying to run away from there in a straight line. However, they weren't doing either of those actions. Or else—were they thinking they could win if there were two of them?

It approached as quietly as it could until it was close to the scent. It couldn't catch sight of its quarry that was still concealed by the trees.

However, that was enough. It was always like that when it brought down prey. If it could see them, then it could be seen by them. It never rushed until they could see each other, and while cautiously discerning the scent it crept closer, and all at once—closing the distance in the blink of an eye, that was hunting.

It arrived nearby. The scents weren't moving.

Therefore—just like the usual hunts, it instantly broke into a run. Despite having a huge body, it raced through the trees like the blowing of the wind.

Since it didn't have any handy abilities like [Forestwalker], when it made this area its territory it cut down all the trees that would interfere with it being able to easily pass through. Of course, no half-assed trees could stop its charge, but because there were times when an alert quarry had taken advantage of them to escape.

It certainly was overwhelmingly powerful, but it was not as if its hunts were successful every time. That was the reason it made preparations.

The source of the scent was ahead of it.

A little black one, and a big black one. The little one was on top of the big one.

They were not a mating pair. Most likely they were two different animals.

But, it wasn't that strange. There were those kinds of animals. They each helped the other one out. The wisdom of the prey to protect themselves from predators like it. For example, the one on top used some special power, and the one on the bottom ran away, that kind of thing.

But if that were the case, they were both nothing more than mere food.

It smiled.

At this distance, they could no longer escape. The little one didn't look like it would make much of a meal, but the one below it was quite the whopper. Since its belly was full right now, it should bury them in the ground to save for later.

However—something was strange.

It was violently stomping its feet while charging. They would notice no matter how unperceptive they were, and if they noticed they would take some kind of action.

So then why are the black ones not scared? Why are they not running away? Nearly all the animals that encountered it had those reactions. The only exceptions to speak of were members of its own race.

Or are they just paralyzed with fear?

It thought about it a little while it was running.

The meat of prey frozen in terror was somewhat lacking. As for its preferences, the softening flesh from when the prey was only half killed and was slowly dying—that was its favorite. The meat from prey that had given up on life after its guts had been devoured while it was still alive was the tastiest of all.

“GRRROOOOAAAAR!”

It rose up and bellowed in front of the prey.

This wasn’t mere intimidation, this was to instill fear.

—C’m on go ahead and run, you might even be able to stay alive! Do something to improve the taste of your meat, please.

It muttered that in its mind. At this distance, there was already no chance of escape. It was only because the success of this hunt was guaranteed that it could show them a little leeway.

“Oh? I’ve never seen one of you before. What a cute bear.”

The little one was yipping.

Come to think of it, it remembered. *I’ve seen things up in the trees that look like the little one lately.* AnkyLOURSI could also climb trees, but due to their huge bodies, tree-climbing was their weak point. That was why when it was taking prey that was up a tree, it could only eat them after cutting down that tree and knocking them to the ground. However, at that time its belly was bulging, and because they were far away and going after them was bothersome, it let them go.

However, right now, there was no need to hold back on eating them if they were on the ground.

The black one on the bottom was looking this way without moving.

It swung its foreleg with the large claws growing out of it.

First, the one on the bottom so they can’t escape.

At the same time as a “ching” sound rang out, its foreleg grew hot—and changed into intense pain.

It lost its balance, and starting from its tail fell backward.

In a panic, it looked at the foreleg that had the intense pain running through it.

It was still there.

It wasn't gone. However, it was in so much pain it was as if it couldn't move.

"GuuUU"

When it looked a long, snake-like, wriggling thing was dangling from the hand of the little one on top. Had it been attacked by that? Then it might be poison. When it was very young it had been bitten by a huge poisonous snake, and this tingling sensation was similar to that.

"O-kay. I'm not gonna hurt ya. I'm not gonna hurt ya."

When the little one swung its hand, a loud BANG came from a nearby tree. The snake-like thing extending from its hand had struck the tree. The force of the impact had burst open the bark as if it had exploded from the inside out.

I can do that much myself. And yet, chills ran through its entire body.

Was this one really little?

Step by step and little by little it began to seem frighteningly big in its eyes.

"It's all right, it's okay. I'm not scary. See, I'm not scary at all."

While it was yipping, the little one on top separated from the big one below. It came down to the ground, and came closer with both its forelegs spread out wide. *It really was that small after all. I wonder just how much of a difference there is between it and me?*

I'm the predator and they're the prey—is how it's supposed to go. Then why—how can this one be approaching me without any fear?

It was as if—the quarry were a predator itself.

It moved its eyes from the little one approaching it to the big one.

It was watching them intently.

This was also something it couldn't understand.

No matter what animals had encountered it, they had never taken this kind of attitude before.

It turned tail and fled from the unfamiliar dread.

When it was very young—around the time it parted with its mother and left the nest, it had experienced fleeing from preys that were far beyond its ability to handle many a time. So there was no shame in running away from things it didn't understand.

However, there was something coiled around its hind leg—

“Alley-ooop.”

Its field of vision spun around in circles.

It was assailed by a sudden feeling of weightlessness, as if it were being hauled up, and then a shock ran across its back.

For some reason, I’m lying on the ground half-turned over.

When it stood up, the long, snake-like thing was coiled around the hind leg that had been pulled, and that little one was holding the part beyond that.

I have no idea what is happening or how, but does this mean that little one knocked me down? Me, by that littleness—

“Geez. I told you not to run away.”

The little one growled, baring its teeth.

It was a sound that said, “Make no mistake, I’m going to eat you.” Maybe it was an ambush-type predator. Did that mean the one in the tree that time was as strong as this one?

“Hmmm. So it’s no good after all, huh. And I can’t just keep Ainz-sama waiting...maybe it would be better to just kill it and skin it instead of capturing it. But wouldn’t that be a huge waste? I could also use it for my experiments. Hmmm... Ainz-sama also said that killing should be the last resort...”

It was staring at it. Maybe this meant that it was slow-moving. That was why it used that snake-like thing extending from its hand to capture prey.

It tried tearing off the snake-like thing coiled around its leg. However, it couldn’t.

It was firmly dug in and wouldn’t budge. In that case, it used the claws that it was so proud of.

There shouldn’t be anything it couldn’t cut with them.

Gu?

It was baffled. It couldn’t cut it. Even though these were the claws that had cut through everything until now, they couldn’t cut.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m not gonna fight it.”

There was the sound of crunching dirt and sliding grass as its body moved. The coiled snake was being hauled in. It was steadily being dragged while leaving tracks in the ground.

There was no longer any doubt. That little one possessed absurd strength.

“I guess it can’t be helped. I don’t really like doing this, but I’ll try it once...I guess I’ll kill ya if it doesn’t work.”

The snake-like thing was removed from its leg. wuh-PSSSH. Before it could

even think, “I should run,” a jolt of pain raced through its body.

“GwoOOOO!”

The jolts of pain came in rapid succession. Arms, legs, face, belly, tail—didn’t really hurt that much—if it were going to try to cover some part of its body it would be its back. If it twisted its body around its muzzle, it would be showered in agony.

When it tried to endure the pain and flee, its body was pinned down by tremendous strength. When it looked, the big one had placed one of its legs on its back, immobilizing it. It was so powerful that it felt like it was going to be buried deeper and deeper into the ground.

Can this really be happening? For one, let alone two, animals to appear whose power far surpasses my own.

The pain continued.

Each time that sound rang out a sharp pain raced through somewhere on its body. Never-ending, like the sound of rain.

Around the time it had already lost the will to resist, the sound finally stopped. There wasn’t any part of its body that didn’t hurt. Its whole body was on fire, and it had a feeling it had swelled up to two or even three times its normal size.

“There, now you’re nice and obedient, right?”

I’m probably going to be eaten after this. What I’ve been doing up till now is now being done to me in turn, that’s all.

“O-kay. Alright then, looking good. Do you know who the boss is now? Well, shall we get going then?”

However, although it’s bearing its teeth, will the little one be able to eat all of me? Or does it intend to share me with the one below it?

Now that I’m the one who has given up on life, there’s no doubt I will surely be tasty.



Inside the Green Secret House, Ainz was working together with Mare.

First, they lined up the food on top of an obsidian desk that was produced using magic. There was also warm soup, but it was put inside something to keep it warm and they planned to serve it right before they ate. They prepared glasses full of ice for three and placed a bottle full of juice in the center of the desk.

Even with the door of the Green Secret House closed it was still perfectly ventilated, it was made so that through the work of a magical mechanism neither sounds nor smells could leak out from the inside. However, because the protection of that magic wouldn't work when the door was opened, even though the two of them had shut themselves in here, it meant that when Aura came back the smell of the food would leak outside.

Smells could be carried for a surprisingly long distance. Aura, of all people, probably wouldn't commit some blunder like returning to base without confirming the surrounding area was safe, but he couldn't rule out the possibility that a scent flying outside of Aura's sensory range wouldn't be noticed by someone else. In this forest, if someone with intelligence and culture caught the scent of some delicious food, they would surely find it suspicious.

The Dark Elves themselves didn't possess a sense of smell on par with beasts. However, in this world, it became possible depending on the class build. Even if the person themselves couldn't do it, if they were using a magical beast, and could communicate with it wordlessly, it would amount to the same thing.

In other words, this meant that Ainz and Mare were diligently working away at something that would make Aura's work wasted. Ainz was also fully aware of this.

So, the reason the two of them were cheerfully preparing for a meal was because, even with Ainz forcing his empty skull to work at full capacity, this was the only idea he could come up with to escape his feelings of guilt in the end.

Namely, it was to greet Aura with a delicious meal when she came home tired from work.

Of course, he might be getting his priorities backward by showing his appreciation with an act that would put all of Aura's perseverance to waste. That was why Ainz thought about it the other way around.

Yes, they just didn't have to be found out by another person.

The problem was the smell being spread around the area, and that someone else might be lured in, enticed by it. If that was the case, he just had to make it so the smell didn't spread.

The most fool-proof way was to have the table set, shut the door when Aura came inside, and serve the food. But that lacked impact.

That was why, when the door opened it would be "ta-dah!" there's the food.

That feeling of surprise itself had the biggest meaning and significance.

So, he had returned to Nazarick and had the head chef prepare dishes with as

weak a smell as possible. On top of that, the wind elemental that Mare summoned with a magic item sent the air around them up into the sky. All the air including the smells would be sent up to the tops of the trees where it would finally start to spread. Scent particles were heavier than air, he didn't know whether it was the same in this world. For some reason, they might not come back down, and even if they did, by the time they reached the ground they would have become considerably diluted.

But, because when the updraft is created the leaves will sway slightly—not to an extent that Ainz would worry about—but if some sharp-eyed person were watching from the sky, they might feel like something was out of place. However, a few days ago, when Ainz was doing high-altitude reconnaissance, ordinary birds were about the only things that were flying in the sky, so it was probably fine not to worry.

“U, um, Ainz-sama. It's about time I returned this to you.”

Around the time the preparations were finished, what Mare held out was the Orb Ainz had given him a short while ago.

It was a top-quality magic item he had named Elemental Gacha. Inside the transparent, glass-like sphere were four lights moving around in circles.

(T/N: “Elemental Gacha” inferred from “ガチャえれ”)

Four times a day you could summon and use an elemental for one hour.

The types of Elemental that could be summoned were fire, water, wind, and earth. There were also the composite Elementals of fire + earth = magma, water + wind = blizzard, earth + water = bog, fire + water = hydrothermal, earth + wind = sandstorm, fire + wind = firenado, and more.

(T/N: “hydrothermal” was 熱水 in JP which is hard to TL. The original suggests water with a temperature range between a hot spring and a deadly caldera, but “scalding elemental” sounds weird)

Among these, the elementals of fire, water, wind, and earth could manifest as high-ranking elementals with levels in the low-40s, mid-rank elementals with levels in the mid-20s, and as lower-rank elementals with levels in the single digits.

On these occasions, a single high-ranking elemental was summoned. The number of mid-rank elementals was random but between 1 and 3 were summoned, the number of lower-rank elementals summoned was also random, but a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 6 were summoned.

In regards to the composite elementals, they could manifest as high-ranking elementals with levels in the mid-50s, mid-rank elementals with levels in the low-30s, and as lower-rank elementals with levels in the low-10s. However, the number of composite elementals summoned in all cases was one.

Just from hearing this, you might think it sounded pretty useful, but unfortunately the elemental summoned was chosen randomly. Moreover, compared to the lower-rank elementals, getting a high-ranking elemental to appear was difficult. When it came to the higher-ranking elementals it was on the same level as winning a Shooting Star Ring.

It was far too strategically useless to not be able to summon something that suited the opponent or situation. If you summoned an earth elemental when flying in the sky, all you could do was watch it drop like a rock. In fact, they had to use the item three times until Mare could summon a wind elemental.

“No, there’s no need for that. I’m giving it to you, Mare. As you are aware, the item is a little iffy, so I’d be happy if you would hold onto it for me if you don’t mind. Although it would be a little different if it could summon, say, the highest ranking elementals, defiled elementals, or holy elementals... Furthermore, it was originally restricted so that only druids could use it. If Mare doesn’t have it, then its only role as an item would be decorating the Treasure Hall.”

It might be useful while your levels were low, but when it came to Ainz and Mare it was an item that couldn’t even be used as a shield. For that reason, he had originally placed it in his Inventory thinking he would give it to someone whose levels were low.

“A, are you sure that’s okay?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind. Rather than leaving it collecting dust in the Treasure Hall, Mare using it would be 100 times more valuable.”

“Th, thank you very much! Uh, umm...so are the elementals summoned by this considered the same as having been summoned using magic of that element?”

“Hm?”

“Uhh, I also have an item that can summon elementals, but for those you have to cast a spell with the corresponding element, or that has it as a secondary element, before activating it.”

In other words, if Mare wanted to summon a flame elemental using an item, he had to use magic that had flame as a secondary element, for example—although Mare couldn’t cast it— [Fireball] before using it.

“I believe the prerequisites have probably been met, but why don’t we test it

out once, the next time we have time to do it?”

“Y, yes! Please let me do it.”

In the past—this was before he trusted them completely—he had investigated the abilities of all the NPCs, and in doing so he had also learned about their equipment.

The item that could summon elementals that Mare mentioned could certainly summon a single high-level elemental, but could only do so once every twenty-four hours, and the summoning duration wasn’t even ten minutes. If he were being honest, the value of the item itself was low. There were plenty of other much more powerful items.

And yet, the reason Mare hadn’t switched out that piece of equipment was because Bukubukuchagama had given it to him.

Ainz knew that this sentiment was shared among all NPCs.

In spite of there being far better items, the NPCs would not change their own items. If they were to change them, it would just be for another piece of equipment that they had been given at the beginning. Of course, if Ainz gave it to them, like he did just now, they would use the item, but they had never submitted a request wanting to switch out their gear of their own accord. The only time might have been when they were having combat drills and Albedo came pleading that she wanted to borrow various things.

They were all being bound.

That was an extremely rude way of putting it, but those were the words that flashed through his mind.

That went for himself, too—

“—uh, umm, is something wrong?”

Ainz was pulled back to reality by the worried-looking Mare’s expression. It seems he had been thinking about meaningless things.

“Hm? Oh, no, nothing, that’s right, it’s nothing at all. I was just thinking about how if I were Mare, how I should use this item, that’s all. Sure enough, summoning an elemental in advance is about all it’s—”

The Cerberus on the other side of the door moved.

When Ainz opened the door Cerberus let out a growl, the three heads were pointed in a certain direction. There could be no doubt that this meant “someone’s comin’.”

Ainz and Mare looked at one another.

“I had intended not to let any smells slip out but... was my plan seen through?

“I, I don’t think that’s what...it is though...”

Cerberus hadn’t met Aura and Fenrir. Even so, it had noticed their scents that clung to Ainz and Mare, so I shouldn’t react like this.

The two of them looked in the direction Cerberus was glaring together. There didn’t appear to be anything hiding in the trees. Mare cupped a hand behind his ears, trying to hear any sounds coming from that direction.

“Uh, umm, it definitely seems like something is heading this way...”

“In other words...it’s not them, is it?”

When Aura and Fenrir departed they had gone making nary a sound.

“I, I’m sorry. I can’t tell...that much... Bu, but, you’re right. As Ainz-sama says, I think if it were my sister she would be coming much more quietly...bu, but... I don’t think there’s any chance that she would make noise on purpose just to let us know that she searched the area and that she knows there’s no problem, and that she’s heading back...”

In other words, he didn’t know.

“Then I guess it can’t be helped. I’ll be going as we originally planned.”

Ainz activated [Perfect Unknowable] and gave a command for Cerberus to accompany him.

Unlike when it was necessary for him to give verbal commands, mental commands wouldn’t be interfered with by [Perfect Unknowable]. However, because even Cerberus couldn’t see Ainz, their positioning was important. If they handled it poorly, it was possible he would be sent flying by Cerberus.

Hmmm, [Perfect Unknowable] really does come in handy. It’s a shame that Pandora’s Actor, who can transform into me, is the only one who can use it. Well, there are others who could do it if I allowed them to use scrolls, but there are things like materials, time limits, and all sorts of other problems with that.

While mumbling and grumbling in his head, Ainz walked following Cerberus’ lead. Before long, even Ainz’s ears could hear the sound of grass being trampled, and he saw an enormous shadow.

A bear?

However, this was different from your average bear. It seemed to have six legs and looked like its fur was soaking wet and clinging to its body. Maybe it was some sort of magical beast with the special ability to shoot out water?

But what caught Ainz’s eye more than that was Aura sitting on its back. She was holding a whip in her hand, and caused the bear-type magical beast to tremble in fear when she cracked it at a regular interval.

On the side was Fenrir accompanying them.

...Aura didn't have that sort of magical beast under her command, right? What the hell is going on?

No, he could just ask her about it. It seems they had noticed the Cerberus and were warily looking this way. But, the reason they didn't immediately move to attack was probably because they couldn't confirm whether it was a wild Cerberus or a Cerberus that Ainz had summoned. They seemed to be saying that if it were Ainz's servant, it should somehow have that feeling to it, or would it be different for a summoned monster?

Ainz canceled [Perfect Unknowable].

"Ainz-sama!" In an instant Aura, the look of caution disappearing from her face, shouted in joy. "Hey! Giddy-up!"

Aura swung her whip at the bear that seemed rather reluctant to come this way. Letting out a scream that could only be thought of as animal abuse, the bear walked to Ainz, terrified.

When Aura arrived in front of Ainz she dismounted the bear.

"Welcome back, Aura."

"I'm back, Ainz-sama. Uh, I'm sure you have some questions, so let me answer them first. This bear-type magical beast seemed to be the boss of this area, so I placed it under my control! I used a whip to drill it into 'em that I'm the boss. Why did I even do such a thing, how could I tell that to Ainz-sama, right?"

Ainz wondered what the hell "that" was.

...To tell you the truth, I don't know just how powerful that magical beast is...but is it strong enough that the Dark Elves and other animals are wary of it?

"Oh, that's right. When you're as strong as Ainz-sama, you can't tell how strong this small-fry is. Let me see, it certainly isn't that strong, but it seems to have more than enough strength to control this area as its territory. So, if it were your ordinary, average Dark Elf—I think they wouldn't get close because it would be dangerous. Actually, it appears nobody approaches this entire area out of fear of this guy. Therefore, I recommend making this our temporary camping area, on the point that an intruder will hardly ever appear."

"That's wonderful."

I see, Ainz thought.

There certainly was a bigger merit in placing it under their control rather than just killing it. Because it was unclear how much time they were going to spend searching for and observing the Dark Elves with this as their base. If that was the

case, then if they killed the lord of the territory, the surrounding area would be in an uproar, and the Dark Elves were likely to come here to gather information. So it would be better to let it live, in the sense that they could also avoid that kind of encounter.

Be that as it may—

“Aura. It’s not as if I’m questioning your judgment, but aren’t you already controlling magical beasts to the limits of your ability? There haven’t been any magical beasts within Nazarick that have been released from your control due to this one being placed under your control, have there?”

In most cases it was customary for them to be freed in order from oldest to newest, not when one was to choose and release magical beasts, but when they were forced to be released.

It was even the same for summoned and created monsters. In YGGDRASIL, there were few examples of a warning message popping up and being able to select which one to release yourself.

“Everything’s A-Okay! Beast Tamers have connections to the magical beasts placed under their control, but I don’t have a connection with this one, per se. In other words, that means I haven’t placed them under my complete control. I just simply drilled it into him that I’m the stronger one. So I’m not using the Beast Tamer ability to raise its abilities either.

“I see...if that’s the case then we can’t say it’s completely safe, can we?

That meant it was possible for its wild instincts to awaken and suddenly attack them. Having said that, he couldn’t imagine Aura overlooking that possibility. She had probably judged that the people here wouldn’t suffer the slightest injury from it. However, they had to confirm it, just in case.

Ainz, wondering what level it was around, suddenly remembered his pet.

“...By the way, which is stronger, Hamsuke or this one?”

Aura had an apologetic look on her face.

No, even if you didn’t look so distressed... Can’t you clearly tell just by looking that the bear-type magical beast is stronger?

“May I be allowed to answer you honestly?”

“Of course. I, the master of Hamsuke, have no reservations at all. Let me hear your unbiased opinion.”

“In that case...speaking in terms of pure physical abilities, it’s stronger than the old Hamsuke. B, but! Hamsuke can use magic, so if you consider that much, it’s difficult to predict which one would win in the event they fought. Because if

magic is effective, the course of the battle will be decided instantly. On top of that...the current Hamsuke even has the Warrior class. If it's in an armored state, I think Hamsuke would win without question."

The image of the Hamsuke that just lazed around sleeping appeared in Ainz's mind. And for some reason, there was a Death Knight next to him.

He became slightly irritated.

Certainly, Hamsuke was classified as a pet, so Ainz didn't mind that he lazed about, you could also say he was working just by walking around with Momon. On top of that, Ainz also knew that he was working hard to acquire the Warrior class and other skills. And yet, it made him angry whenever he saw someone goofing off next to someone who was working hard.

"You don't have to go so far to stand up for Hamsuke, Aura," but he swallowed those words. It was out of consideration for Aura's feelings. She would never praise Hamsuke.

"I see—" Could he say anything more than I see? Ainz, who didn't want to say anything like "Hamsuke's pretty amazing too, huh," was at a loss, so he decided to ignore it and move on. "—So did a magical beast that strong just happened to be here? Or is it that magical beasts like this are common in the Sea of Trees? It's something I'd like to investigate thoroughly. We haven't spotted any high-level magical beasts on our route so far, have we?"

"Yes. There may have been some that were just passing through, but I didn't see any. Perhaps if we searched, we might be able to find some, but what are we going to do?"

"No, we won't bother with that. It's not as if we came here to find this sort of magical beast."

"Understood, Ainz-sama. But there's something about exploring that is a little attractive. Magical beasts like this bear haven't been found even in the Great Forest of Tob. Therefore, there's a high probability that plants and animals— the native medicinal plants, and things that are unique to this place— optimized for this environment are living here. On top of that, there may be places where some kind of special phenomenon is occurring."

In this world that had magic, places where special phenomena occurred existed.

Water that flowed from bottom to top, a hill where a pillar of rainbow-colored light stood on the days it hailed, a desert where an enormous tornado occurred once every few decades, it seemed that these sorts of peculiar sights could be

seen. That's right, could—unfortunately, there still weren't any of those mysterious areas within the territories swallowed up by the Sorcerer Kingdom.

In YGGDRASIL, these sorts of places had unique effects, and rare materials and monsters could be found there.

Would that rule also apply to this world? Let's take the Pillar of Prismatic Light that dropped a Rainbow Stone, as if that light had solidified, after it vanished, for example. This was famous as an item that aided in the creation of magic items.

Wouldn't it be related to the strengthening of Nazarick if that kind of special region could be brought under the Sorcerer Kingdoms' control?

"It doesn't seem likely that the Elves have a thorough knowledge of the Great Sea of Trees. If that's the case, then it's just as you said, Aura. In the future our objective will be exploring this place—that's right, it may be necessary to send out Adventurers."

The undead that Ainz produced were unable to do things like discovering new species of medicinal plants. Maybe it was time for an adventuring party with an undead team of luggage bearers added on to take the stage after all.

"Now then—let's head back. Mare is waiting for us."

"Okay!... Even so, Ainz-sama. This is just to confirm, but is that Cerberus something that Ainz-sama has summoned?"

"Yes, of course, you're exactly right. It's the monster I summoned to substitute for Fenrir."

Ainz walked along with Aura. Of course, Fenrir and Cerberus were also with them. The magical beast bear displayed an attitude that it didn't want to go, but with just one crack of Aura's whip, it mutely came along.

"...By the way, Aura. What are you planning to do with that magical beast? Considering that it hasn't been placed completely under your control, how do you think we should deal with it?"

"Yes. So I'd like to consult with you on this, but is it okay if I bring it back to Nazarick?"

"Are you going to let it roam freely on the Sixth Floor?"

It was one thing if it possessed the degree of intelligence necessary to hold a conversation like Hamsuke, but he couldn't allow a low-intelligence magical beast to roam around freely. Even a magical beast around this level could probably kill the ordinary maids. If that were so, then a portion of the NPCs would be barred from entering the Sixth Floor. And that wasn't all, there were the other plant-type monsters on the Sixth Floor. There was also the question of

what to do about their safety.

“I wasn’t considering going so far as to let it roam around freely, but I have been thinking I want to try placing magical beasts under my control, excluding the Skills I have as a Beast Tamer. I was thinking that I could use it in that experiment.”

“Hmm. If it’s something like that I really want to assist you with it but...”

To gain a power that was unique to this world, and impossible in YGGDRASIL. From the point of view of Ainz, who was thinking about it increasing their own abilities that couldn’t grow any further, he should have accepted Aura’s proposal. However—

“It’s not like it absolutely has to be this magical beast, does it? Something much weaker...how about starting with a magical beast that’s around level 1?”

If it were a magical beast of that order, then the NPCs—even if the ordinary maids were attacked, they could probably manage it somehow or other with the strength of their equipment.

“That might be fine, too...” Aura showed signs that she didn’t accept it. “If Ainz-sama says to do it that way then—”

“—No, I’m not saying anything like that, alright? But, I was wondering why does it have to be that bear? Is it that you actually like bears?”

Suddenly, Aura looked back over her shoulder.

“...Fen. I’m going to get mad.” Was all she said in a slightly cold tone, and immediately turned her head forward. “—Sorry about that Ainz-sama. It was because Fen looked like he was going to do something weird...”

Ainz looked back, but it didn’t feel like he was about to do anything. However, that was probably because she had said something. Ainz returned his gaze and asked Aura a question.

“Ah, well, don’t worry about it. Now then, why that bear?”

“Yes. It can’t talk like Hamsuke can, but it seemed like it was fairly intelligent. Fen and the others can’t talk, but they’re really clever, aren’t they? I don’t think whether being able to talk or not is the end-all-be-all of intelligence. As you would expect, the ones with a certain degree of intelligence are more suited to training.”

Certainly, had a feeling that he may or may not have a memory of seeing Fen and thinking the same thing. Suzuki Satoru lived a life unconnected with pets, but that seemed to be fundamentally different from the “good dogs” he heard about in stories. Of course, if you just said it was because he was a magical beast

that would be the end of it.

“So that’s why Fen sometimes listens to what Mare says, the ones with a certain degree of intelligence are more suited for training after all. Or, you could just raise one from infancy...”

“It would take too much time to do that, huh? Then something that matures in a short time like a dog...Aah, I don’t know if that’ll be useful for the training of magical beasts in that situation.”

In order to train magical beasts, it was logical to try and use them. When you considered that you also had no choice but to accept Aura’s proposal.

“...but outside of Nazarick is fine. Look, right now, there’s that place where we brought the humans from the Royal Capital are living, right? How about there?”

“That’s the fake Nazarick I built, right? The adventurers are using it... How about if I don’t let it roam around the Sixth Floor, and I keep it isolated until I believe its training is completely finished?”

“...could that be our point of compromise?”

“Yes! Thank you very much, Ainz-sama. For listening to my own selfish wishes.”

Ainz smiled at Aura with her head bowed.

“Not at all. Just as Albedo is conducting combat drills, that attitude of trying to improve oneself is magnificent by itself. All of you NPCs are my—no, Ainz Ooal Gown’s—pride and joy.”

Aura’s eyes were wide open, and she stopped moving.

At that transformation Ainz scolded himself, had he said something he shouldn’t have? He didn’t have any recollection of that. No—

—I didn’t get that feeling, but did I go and say something that made Aura feel uncomfortable from her perspective? Being Chagama-san’s pride and joy itself was everything to her, and she didn’t give a damn about everyone else, something like that? Or could it be that she’s... happy? It’s not as if she’s smiling... Hmm. Maybe I should act anticipating the worst, instead of expecting the best.

But it would be even more awkward if he carelessly apologized. Therefore, Ainz only had one measure he could take.

“Oh, that’s right. To show our appreciation for all your hard work, we’ve prepared a meal. I prepared it together with Mare, you know. Oops, of course, none of us know how to cook, so all we did was carry it back from Nazarick.”

He glossed over the whole thing.

“Hahaha,” while he continued to laugh, he took the opportunity to peek at

Aura's appearance.

Hm? She's not mad? It might be a forced smile, or it might be a smile of flattery, but she is smiling, right?

Aura was smiling so broadly that he couldn't believe it was insincere. She might have been happy at hearing that a meal had been prepared. Or maybe she was happy at being praised by Ainz?

At any rate, I need to give the NPCs a whole lot more praise, don't I.

Ainz hardened his resolve to do so. He had a feeling that one of the Guild Members had said in a voice devoid of emotion, "Gratitude is something that isn't transmitted to the other party if left unsaid. If you think you're transmitting it and say nothing, then before you know it your wife's discontent will accumulate outrageously."

Was that Touch-san?

While he was desperately trying to remember, the Green Secret House came into view. When they were all standing in front of it Mare, who was monitoring things from the inside, opened the door.

"Welcome back, si, sis."

"Yeah. I'm home."

She could see a fully set dining table behind Mare. Aura's gaze raced over it. Ainz was also racked with tension.

"Wow, it looks so delicious!"

Seeing Aura's face break into a smile, Ainz was relieved. He had been a little worried she would say something like, "Aww, and I was in the mood for katsudon today..."—while thinking that was something she would definitely never say. Because he rarely had the chance to share a table with someone, he had been worried that his pickiness about the food had become extremely dulled and crude.

"Yes, the head chef would be happy to hear you think so. In addition to that, I also had Fenrir's portion prepared, but..."

They had placed an enormous huge lump of meat, exclusively for Fenrir, on top of a stump they had prepared next to the base. It was a cow they had been raising for livestock, so fresh that it had only just been strangled, and the blood was still dripping. The dairy farm was in a place that was separated by a short distance from Nazarick, a vast plot where the cattle were largely left to graze.

The head chef said, "I personally prefer the taste of grain-fed to grass-fed meat for that breed." Perhaps he had a big influence, or other people felt the same way,

but it wasn't a very popular choice of meat within Nazarick.

Originally they weren't allowed to graze, maybe we should raise them so they become even more delicious. However, they didn't have enough manpower for that. In E-Rantel, among the people who had been forcefully moved in order to create the demi-human district—its nickname— there were hardly any people who had skills related to animal husbandry, and even if there had been, they would have gone in the direction of the frontier villages. Be that as it may, it was just someone who was fussy about the taste talking, there weren't any problems if it were a magical beast's feed.

“...What should we do about the portion for that magical beast bear?”

“He'll be fine even if he doesn't eat. It looks like he ate right before he ran into me. On top of that, apparently one kind of training is not giving him any food until he completely understands that I'm the boss, and obeys me.”

“Is that so... No, well, it might certainly be exactly like that. Even for humans or other races, the ones that have been mentally pushed to the breaking point, fully obey us.”

They entered the Green Secret House while saying that and other things.

“You can go ahead and eat.”

When Aura said that before going through the door, Fenrir, who had been patiently waiting, sank his teeth into the meat. The magical beast bear just blankly watched that sight. That figure with the sagging shoulders certainly did appear human-like, and just like Aura said, it made you feel like it did possess some level of intelligence.

Incidentally, Cerberus didn't need dinner. Even if you gave a summoned monster food, it would be pointless. It wasn't as if there weren't any cases when they were strengthened by giving them food that granted Buffs, but at least right now Ainz didn't feel an ounce of necessity to do that sort of thing. “Huh? You serious?” “Bullying is not cool!” “So hungry.” Having decided that, Ainz had a hunch those were the reactions to his decision coming back from the Cerberus, but it was probably just his imagination.

The three of them arrived at the table Ainz had prepared.

“Go on and eat.”

The two of them said, “Thank you for this meal,” in unison. Naturally, Ainz was not able to eat. Aura was the first one to eat.

“Ainz-sama! This is delicious!”

“Mm-hmm”, Mare nodded in agreement with his sister's words. Ainz smiled

at the two of them.

“That’s great. I’ll pass it along to the head chef...I want you two to listen to what I have to say while you’re eating, but we know from Aura’s investigation that we’ll be fine even if we build a temporary base in this area. Therefore, we will choose a place to relocate the Green Secret House, and after that’s finished I want us to take action in order to find the Dark Elf Village.”

The two of them stopped eating and earnestly listened to what Ainz had to say. Well, even Suzuki Satoru would have stopped eating if his boss started talking about something job-related.

“After that, we will establish friendly relations with the Dark Elves. As our plan to carry that out—so long as Aura permits it, I want to carry out Mission: Red Ogre Cried.”

Ainz grinned. He had once carried it out with his friends, and those friends had dubbed it a dirty trick. In truth, right when he was thinking about using a monster he had summoned himself, Aura brought back just the right magical beast for the job. If she gave her approval to use it, there would be no other hand to play as magnificent as this one.

It not being under her complete control was an element of uncertainty in the plan, but conversely, that would also increase the realism.

He didn’t know whether it differed by the individual or by their race, but there was no uniformity in the acting ability of monsters. The Evil Lord of Wrath had given an outstanding performance, but according to Shizu it seemed that, “the Circlet Demon was a damn ham.”

(T/N: “damn ham” as in “ham actor”, the original is “クソ(kuso) 大根(daikon)” = “shitty actor”)

He had wanted to conceal their identities and strength, but wouldn’t it be better if they could just slip right in? If it were fine to spend however many years on it, there might have been a much more different way to go about it, but when he considered the Theocracy he didn’t think they had that much time.

“Cried because of sadness? Or cried as in shouting? Ainz-sama, just what is this plan?”

(T/N: Original line had puns on “cried”, hard to TL. “食らい？いえ、暗いでしょうか？”)

Ainz once more grinned at the curious Aura. At one time, it was one of the many things he had learned from his friends.

It seemed that the strategy's name was based on something, but Ainz acted like he knew, without actually knowing. But he could explain what that strategy was if he based his explanation on his real experiences with it. Ainz opened his mouth—

“—Oh! It's *The Red Oni Who Cried*, right? I read that book recently!”

Being the first time he learned the source of the strategy's name, Ainz closed his mouth and slowly looked up at the sky.

If he had seen a majestic blue sky here, Ainz's mind, its own ignorance beaten into it by a child, might have also learned a thing or two. He might have received the consolation that he was small compared to the entire world.

However, all he saw was the ceiling of the Green Secret House. After he had stared at the unremarkable ceiling for a bit, he turned his face to see Mare's pure and innocent smile.

The possibility still remained that Mare was jumping to the wrong conclusion.

“...Is that right? You're something else, Mare. I've never read that book before. You say it's called *The Red Oni Who Cried*...”

“Yes! So the contents of that book are—what we're going to use that bear that my sister brought back to do, right!”

Oh yeah, probably, that's a bull's eye.

“...Uh huh. Yeah. You sure are amazing Mare...”

And so, Ainz showed the two of them a smile.



Chapter 3 | Aura's Hard Work

1

The Dark Elf Village in the Great Sea of Trees.

It was no different from the Elf Village.

For example, the race called the Wild Elves were once ordinary Elves. Shifting their sphere of living to the grassland produced changes not only in the form of the culture but also physically, to the extent that at present they had been recognized as a new species.

So the reason that physical or magical changes had not occurred in Dark Elves, was because on top of being the same race as Elves from the start, they were living in the same environment. There were also hardly any differences in culture, and their way of life was centered on the Elf Trees. Hence, the classes they gained were, just like with the Elves, mainly Ranger and Druid.

The differences were just skin color, forms of animal repellent, and other trivial customs at best.

In Dark Elf villages, they used an animal repellent that produced its avoidance effect by using scents. The Dark Elves were taught this precious bit of wisdom by the Treants and other inhabitants of the forest where they were living before

moving to the Great Sea of Trees. Potent smelling herbs were planted around the village, created and spread around a special drug that repelled animals, and—although their powers had to be considerably divided between duration and area of effect—used Druidic magic.

This method was also effective in the Great Sea of Trees, and compared to other elf villages—excluding the Royal Capital— the Dark Elf villages were safe.

However, the Elves did not know of this method. If it were to spread, the avoidance effect produced by scents would drop. Magical beasts as well as other animals may seem stupid, but that was not so. On the contrary, if they learned that food was at the other end of that smell, the danger level would rise. For those reasons, then even if they were taken in by their kinfolk, they couldn't readily teach them this method.

However, on that day, the Dark Elves, believing in their own “safety”, would learn they were on thin ice.

The violent roar could be heard from far away.

This was a regular occurrence in the Great Sea of Trees. Whether it be in the glow of sunrise or late at night, there were no days when the voices of the animals could not be heard.

Moreover, there were species that, despite being small in body, had howls that would surprise you. Hearing a single roar didn't mean that something was happening.

The howls were certainly frightening. There were various species of magical beasts that could put special powers into their roars. Those who heard them would become frightened, confused, lose the will to fight, and occasionally, there were some that could even cause exhaustion.

But if it were heard from a distance, then even that special ability wouldn't manifest. A single, distant roar had no connection to danger and should have been a very typical occurrence in the landscape.

However, that day, one dark elf man called for everyone to be on guard. The man's height wasn't outside of the average range for a dark elf. However, his long, slender and supple limbs, whose lively, yet efficient movements made you feel like there was a power hidden inside them, easily made the man appear bigger than his actual height.

His refreshing looks were well-proportioned and even within the village, he was very popular with the ladies.

There was no one among the Dark Elves living in the Great Sea of Trees who

didn't know this man. A first-rate Ranger who had accumulated vast amounts of experience, bearing the ancient and honorable surname of House Blueberry—one of the 13 families of the beginning—that became the central figures during the Great Migration.

In his hands, the man—Blueberry Egnia—held a Dark Elf-style compound bow, of which there were only a handful even in this village.

It was a bow one would not be permitted to use unless they had earned an extremely good score at the Archery Tournament held in the season when the Becoa flowers bloomed—once every three years.

Obedying Egnia's call, the dark elves' soldiers assembled immediately. Although they were called soldiers, they were Rangers that had not gone out to hunt, not full-time soldiers.

The village where Egnia lived was the largest Dark Elf village in the vicinity. And yet, there were only about 200 residents, and they had no leeway to put full-time warriors in place.

In front of his friends who had assembled with puzzled looks appearing on their faces, Egnia moved his ears slightly—while focusing on the distant sounds, he announced in a stiff voice,

“There's no other reason I deliberately had you all assemble. That roar just now. I have heard it once before. That is the roar of an adult, a fully matured one at that, 'Ursus.”

Egnia sensed all those assembled immediately became tense.

It was obvious as to why. If you were a Dark Elf living in this forest, even if it were a child, there would be none who did not know the name of the one magical beast that should be feared the most—Ankyloursus.

In the area around this village, there were a number of species of monsters whose danger level was high, but the Ankyloursus was the one at the top of that list.

Maybe it would be possible if it were an 'ursus cub, but it wasn't an exaggeration to say that attacking an adult—a fully grown adult at that—meant death. It had armor that repelled even arrows, and physical strength that could easily bisect a Dark Elf. Furthermore, due to all of its physical abilities being high, running away from them was considerably difficult; it was a truly terrifying monster.

“...I certainly did hear some kind of roar, but did it really belong to an 'ursus? Are you sure you didn't mishear it?”

One dark elf woman asked doubtfully.

One of the 3 vice-masters of the hunt, and a skilled Ranger who held a composite bow just like Egnia's in her hands.

It seemed that even she couldn't tell just from that roar whether or not it was an 'ursus.

Moreover—a cute bird called the Howling Bird, for example, could imitate the roars of various species of monsters. And there were other animals in this forest with abilities similar to this.

With those kinds of animals inhabiting the forest, identifying the owner from a single, distant howl was extremely difficult. Her question was a reasonable one. However, Egnia was the greatest Ranger in this forest. He surpassed everyone not just in his skill with a bow, but also in the sharpness of his senses, and even in his ability to analyze the information those senses picked up. Her question was not out of any distrust of Egnia, it came from her more than half-wishing for this to “please be a mistake.”

“It's very unfortunate, but there's no doubt. No matter how much time passes, it's impossible for me to forget that roar that makes your hair stand on end—that makes you feel the overwhelming difference in strength. Even now it's still stuck in my ears. It's not something that I could mishear.”

The next to speak was the Master of the Hunt.

The pillars of authority in the village were the Master of the Hunt, the Council of Elders, the Chief Pharmacist, and the Rite Master. The Council of Elders was composed of three people, so altogether there were six people. Meaning he was one of them.

There wasn't a composite bow in his hands. His specialty, if anything, was trapping, but even if you took that out of the equation, his abilities were far behind those of Egnia. Be that as it may, as a Ranger there was no doubt that he was influential, and though he was younger than Egnia he had a cool and collected personality, a person with nothing to criticize as Master of the Hunt.

“A mature 'ursus howling...so we can confirm that something has entered its territory?”

In most cases, it would roar when fighting a strong enemy or a hostile member of its own kind. Otherwise, it was when it was announcing a victory, or declaring its territory. Or also, when it was breeding. However, whichever of those it was, it was highly likely that someone had entered the 'ursus' territory.

Because once an Ankyloursus established its territory— the territory

expanded as its body grew—it would very rarely try to change it. And it was also very rare for it to go hunting outside of it.

Therefore, it was reasonable to think that someone had entered its territory.

“Haa... What a nuisance. I don’t know just what monster went inside it, I hope that the careless fools who disturbed the peace end up as the ‘ursus’ prey.”

The dark elves all around him agreed with the Master of the Hunt’s complaint. Egnia gave a wry smile to those friends.

Given the Ankyloursus’ disposition, as long as they didn’t thoughtlessly provoke it, it was a well-known fact that it could become the neighborhood balancer, in a sense.

“I will agree with that opinion, but we don’t know whether or not it’s even entered the territory yet, yes? When I heard the ‘ursus’ roar before, it was when two of them were fighting. And the fight that time was being held outside of its territory.

“Um, excuse me, Egnia-san, I have a question... I hardly heard it at all, but since you mentioned it, I do think it’s true that an ‘ursus roared. But, its territory is fairly separated from here, right? So why did you call us all here?”

“Yes, I don’t know if something happened to the ‘ursus, but it’s a fact that some situation is occurring that is making it roar. Maybe it’s changing its territory, or maybe the ruler of that territory is changing. Or maybe something even more different is occurring. For example...that’s right,”

After taking a breath, Egnia continued and said,

“Such as a powerful magical beast that is able to escape from the ‘ursus even though it lost, and is heading this way. So, we should simultaneously put the village on guard for anything that could happen, and even if it’s tomorrow, we head in the direction of the roar and get a glimpse of the state of the forest.

Everyone present agreed.

It would be problematic if they did not quickly sense changes in the forest and share information. It was extremely important to those who lived by receiving the blessings of the forest.

“—Today’s hunt is canceled. Maybe it would be safer to stop anyone from going into the forest altogether, let alone for hunting. We still have food, right?”

“We’re fine. We bagged some huge game lately. But even so, we should still tell the Rite Master what is going on right away, so we can have him start making fruit. We don’t know how many days it’ll take until we finish confirming if everything’s safe, after all.”

“After that...right. We should also talk to the Elders about that. We’ll have the Elders devise a way to disseminate the information to everyone so that someone who doesn’t know what’s going on doesn’t go into the forest.”

Prompted by Egnia’s call for attention, everyone exchanged opinions. Nobody said, “You’re overthinking it.” The forest brought blessings, but it also suddenly threw misfortune your way. Stacking precaution on top of precaution without overlooking the slightest ill omen was crucial to living in the Sea of Trees.

They should quickly make it known that there was a possibility the order of the forest was deteriorating.

“What should we do about the other villages? Should we contact them once we’ve gotten some grasp on the situation? Or should we quickly tell them that we’re facing this kind of situation?”

“I can sense that both of those are correct, but I also think they might be wrong...Why don’t we leave just all the decisions about that up to the Elders?”

“Hey, just hold on a minute, we should consolidate our opinions. If we present it as the opinion from the majority, it’ll come in handy in winning the argument when those hard-headed old farts start proposing we do something weird.”

“...Calling them old farts is going too far, Ganen. Certainly, they can be inflexible at times, but in their own way, the Elders have abundant experience. We’re just choosing a path that can be considered even safer by benefiting from their wisdom.”

One of the Vice-Masters-of-the-Hunt—Plum Ganen—was rebuked by the Master-of-the-Hunt.

“Tha—“

Ganen, red-faced, tried to start loudly talking, but his mouth was covered by Egnia’s hand.

“—That’s about enough out of you. Considering what I called everyone together for, talk about what we need to do right now. You know well enough the threat an ’ursus poses, don’t you?”

Knowing that Ganen had shut his mouth, Egnia removed his hand.

Egnia let out an internal sigh.

We’ve confirmed that it’s not unconditionally wrong to oppose the Elders, but I wish you would consider the time and place.

“That’s right. What we should be prioritizing is what we are going to do about vigilance in the village, so let’s leave the talk about the old farts for later, okay? That’s a lot of people after all, right?”

“If we’re going to be on guard all day today, we should do it in three shifts. Thinking about tomorrow, even more so. “

They were more or less used to keeping watch all day long, and if they had magic that removed fatigue cast on them, it would have any effect on the next day’s activities.

But if they were going on an investigation until they were close to the ‘ursus’ territory, they would want to avoid their senses growing even the slightest bit dull.

“You’re right. That’s—“

They heard a roar. With a tense expression on the faces of everyone present, they stared intensely in the direction it came from.

“Didn’t that sound really close?”

One person put into words the unease they all harbored. Egnia nodded simply once in agreement.

“Just like Egnia said just a little while ago, isn’t it chasing after something that went into its territory and then escaped?”

Ankyloursi had a tendency to stick to their prey. If an animal they regarded as their prey escaped, they would pursue it even outside of their territory. Chasing after it while roaring was a little different than the image they had in their minds, but it was more comprehensible than it being beaten and driven out of its territory.

“If that’s the case then as long as the ‘ursus catches its prey, that might even fill its belly, then this village might be safe...If there’s fleeing prey, then do we lead it away from here and shoot it to death?”

“Stop it! That would just result in pointlessly provoking it further. First, there’s a good chance the prey has the ability to run away from the ‘ursus as much as it can. If the prey comes this way, we should at least drive it away.”

“No, wait. It would be troublesome if the ‘ursus came within the vicinity of the village. It would be a nuisance if it considered this place to be a feeding ground. We should have a few people go outside the village, and if the ‘ursus or the prey look like they’re heading this way, lead them in a different direction.”

It was fine for various opinions to be flying past each other, but it wasn’t as if they could spend too much time on it. He didn’t really want to butt in, but he couldn’t say such a thing. Egnia clapped his hand once and drew everyone’s attention to him.

“Whatever the situation is, the fact remains that this is an abnormal state of

affairs. We should get to work immediately. If the 'ursus returns to its territory, then fine. But if it doesn't...if it loses sight of prey even after leaving its territory—" Egnia looked out over everyone, "—and in addition to that, if it lets the prey get away in the vicinity of the village, it would make for a very long, awful day. "

The faces of everyone imagining just what would happen frowned.

"First, what is important is calling for the aid of everyone in the village, not just those of us here. The power of the Druids will become absolutely necessary. Then, the Chief Pharmacist probably has a poison that will even affect an 'ursus."

For beast-type magical beasts like the 'ursus, rather than trying to defeat them with physical attacks, magic that manipulated its mind was more effective. Even against an opponent that was protected by a thick hide, fat, and bulky muscles, it was possible to deal damage above that of bows and arrows by using magic—for example, it would be damaged just from touching the flames of the fire elementals that the Druids could summon—and other such methods.

They probably wouldn't win if they fought it directly, but if they used magic and other such methods, then even in the past they had somehow or other won against a magical beast that rivaled an 'ursus.

"But, gathering here just discussing things is only adding to our wasted time. We should seize the initiative, but—" Egnia looked at the Master-of-the-Hunt. "—could we leave it to you?"

"Haa—" The Master-of-the-Hunt reluctantly shook his head. "...I guess it can't be helped at this point. Alright, you lot. Starting from all the ones with outstanding skills on down, solidify the village's defenses. The other half goes around warning everyone in the village. Those that have finished warning people will next guard those unable to fight. Beniri, I leave the division of personnel to you. Next, Ganen goes to the Chief Pharmacist, and Ovei to the Rite Master, and tells them about this. I will go to the Council of Elders. Come on, MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!"

When Egnia tried to move out, the Master-Of-the-Hunt sent him a signal, so he ran over to him.

"I've been thinking this for a long time, but shouldn't you, the person with the most outstanding skills in the whole village, take the role of leader?"

"Wouldn't it just make everything more troublesome if we did that? My name, though it's also due to who my family is, is also somewhat known in the other villages." "It's not just somewhat," ignoring the Master-of-the-Hunt's words,

Egnia continued. "If it comes to that, the conflict will spread to the other villages more than it already has."

"...Gah, my head hurts...Do you think things would change if the Elders pulled back a little, really just a tiny, little bit?"

"That's probably never going to happen. After all, what would probably happen is, if they pull back now, the more they'll want to pull back later. Even if all the Elders retired, the problem would just spread to other villages. We can also say that things will go better for us if the Elders are still being hard-headed about things."

"What can we do to solve this problem?"

"There's no way of solving this problem."

"Until the moment when there's a major failure at some point, right?"

The Master-of-the-Hunt went silent.

"I'm going to defend the village."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you, too."

Parting with the Master-of-the-Hunt, Egnia took up his position and while he continued his vigil in the direction of the roar, it seemed that information was rapidly spreading within the village. This wasn't just because Rangers were spreading the news, it was thanks to a well-developed system of information delivery they used on a daily basis, as a consequence of being a village with dangerous monsters living right next door.

After not even ten minutes had passed, the Rite Master had started producing food. The Chief Pharmacist had also already sent Egnia the potent poison and its antidote, just in case.

Time passed with them on alert for now.

They hadn't heard the 'ursus roar since then. The tension Rangers that had assembled because of that, began to recede. It was the same for Egnia; he relaxed his shoulders and massaged out the stiffness of the hands that held his bow.

Had the 'ursus caught its prey? Or it might have returned to its territory because its prey got away. At that time the Master-of-the-Hunt was standing next to him.

"...Just to be safe it's probably necessary for us to quickly go and investigate its territory. Can I count on you for that?"

"—I thought this would happen. Leave it to me."

He was already thinking about his movements when he entered its territory in his head.

Egnia stared intensely in the direction of its territory, as if he could perceive the figure of the 'ursus that should have been there in his line of sight, when he had a feeling that he had seen some large thing behind the trees of the forest.

“Chichii!”

Egnia vibrated his lips and made a sound that was like the cry of a bird. This was no mere sound. This was a special sound Egnia could emit through the mastery of his class, it would tell his friends that heard it to be on guard. By doing this, allies that heard this sound wouldn't be hit by a surprise attack and be unable to move.

The mood of starting to let their guard down instantly tensed back up.

While feeling everyone's attention was on him, Egnia pointed in the direction where he had just seen the shadow using his chin and without taking his eyes off it.

Please just let it be my imagination.

Please just let it be me mistaking it for something else.

Please just let it be a misunderstanding.

He had only caught sight of that shadow for just a moment. It just happened to be behind the shadow of many huge trees for just a single blink of the eye as far as his line of sight extended. It was more than possible that he had mistaken it for something else. However, as a Ranger who possessed high competency, Egnia's excellent vision easily betrayed even his own expectations.

“...It's the Ankyloursus...”

In spite of the volume of the words that someone had reflexively let slip—that voice was frighteningly and clearly audible to the ears of everyone there.

Yes. It was already obvious to anyone with eyes to see.

A huge shadow was sluggishly approaching them from between the trees.

What was there was the Destroyer of the Great Sea of Trees—the Ankyloursus.

However—

“He, hey, Blueberry-san. Isn't...that...thing...huge? Are 'ursi really that big?

A young Ranger swallowed his spit and asked.

Because it was at a distance and hidden by the trees, they couldn't definitively confirm what that body was. By comparing it with the surrounding trees they could get a rough approximation. It was far too big. No, it was too gigantic.

“...Sumomo. The 'ursus I saw before wasn't that big. It couldn't have gotten any bigger. Its growth rate is abnormally fast, an abnormal specimen...if we're unlucky, what we're dealing with here is...” Egnia said as if the words were being

squeezed out of him. "...a Lord."

The air shivered with a chill.

Those deviating from the usual size, having different colored fur, or other peculiar changes, and possessing unique powers, were called abnormal specimens in this village. However, even among them there were those that soared above all others, tenaciously evolving, reigning as the pinnacle of their species, and occasionally possessing an enormous influence over an extensive area through their combat abilities. Therefore, such individuals were given the title of Lord.

In other words, if the one before their eyes were really that, it meant that it would be far stronger than the normal ones

Even an ordinary Ankyloursus was a worrisome opponent, but if the whole village fought together, they would probably be able to drive it back. However, if the magical beast before their eyes were indeed an 'ursus Lord, it was utterly unimaginable that there would be any survivors.

"Impossible! I've heard there's a Lord, but it should be much farther north!" one of the Rangers was excitedly talking, the spit flying from their mouth. However, they controlled the volume of their voice so as not to provoke the 'ursus. "What the hell happened to the Village of Aju?"

A village of the same dark elves—they had learned through hearsay that a Lord existed in the vicinity of the Village of Aju. Lords weren't something that appeared frequently. That being the case, they could consider this to be the same specimen as the Lord in the vicinity of the Village of Aju.

"—Were they all wiped out?"

If the Lord were to change its territory, or if it were starting to move in the direction of this village, someone from the Village of Aju should have come to warn them. But no one had come. Despite that, the Lord was right over there.

Silence dominated this place. If you just kept going in the direction from which they first heard the roar, there'd lie the Village of Aju.

...The Village of Aju turned into a feeding ground, the 'ursus learned about the food called Dark Elves and relied on scents or something else to head this way.

Nobody wanted to say it, but everyone had arrived at the same conclusion.

The color of despair mixed with the tense atmosphere.

Even if it had acquired a taste for Dark Elves at the Village of Aju, it shouldn't have known that fresh food was here.

There were many gourmets among the Ankyloursus. They were omnivorous,

but they had particular foods they preferred to eat. If Dark Elves satisfied its discerning tastes, they had to abandon this village, and even if they did that, it didn't mean that it wouldn't pursue them. Therefore, they should lead it away and separate it from the village.

However, there was a problem.

"No, we can't declare that the Village of Aju was wiped-out," all eyes were on Egnia. "As I originally witnessed, there was an 'ursus building its territory in this vicinity. If the Lord came straight here from the Village of Aju, it would have entered that 'ursus' territory. It would be strange not to hear two roars if that happened. In other words...the 'ursus that originally marked out its territory in this vicinity, probably grew up and became a Lord."

There was still a chance that it was the Lord from the Village of Aju. If the Lord and the 'ursus that marked out its territory in this vicinity were different sexes, there probably wouldn't be a fight. It was also possible that if the two of them bumped into each other again one of the 'ursi—most likely the Lord—wouldn't roar.

However, whether or not the Village of Aju survived was, in these circumstances, not important. What they should be thinking about right now was, if there were no changing the fact that the Lord was heading for this village, what should they do, what would be the best move to make?

If that was the case—

"—Fighting the Lord is suicide. There is no other way than to summon elementals and flee while they're buying us some time."

"You think that's something we can just do?! There's no question we'll be attacked by that thing in the forest! More importantly, we can just give it all the stored meat and other food it wants, and let it fill its belly."

"That's right! 'ursi have a disposition similar to a bear's. They probably like honey, too! We'll smear it on the meat too and hand it—"

At that moment, a roar reverberated that seemed like it made the earth, the air, the forest, and the cores of their bodies tremble. It could no longer hide in the shadows of the trees.

The slowly walking Ankyloursus Lord was there.

The breaths of the dark elves became quick and shallow. The minds of everyone in that place went blank. Whatever ideas that had just a moment ago were blown away.

They could taste the difference in power with bodies, and they shriveled up. It

wasn't as if that roar just now had a special effect that induced fear or other mental effects.

This was just simply, and fatally, their reaction because the dark elves understood the difference in their positions as living things. In other words, it meant that the difference in strength was so big and to such an extent, that the dark elves were merely powerless beings that would be trampled underfoot.

—*This is bad.*

Nearly all the dark elves were convinced of the tragedy befalling them and were under the control of resignation. However, it was still too early to accept that.

“—MOVE!!”

It was a shout to scold and rouse himself.

“Muh, muh, move, you say? And just what the hell can we do!”

“How the hell should I know!”

Egnia replied to the female dark elf's shrieking question with a few brief words that hung heavy in the air like a machete.

“Ho, how the hell should you know?”

“You're just lashing out...”

“You can cou—No! How is there any way that even I would understand or know anything about what to do in this kind of situation! Even so, we have to move! What can we do all huddled together like this! At least those ideas just now were—”

Was its objective to also make them terrified? The 'Ursus Lord's pace was surprisingly slow.

Its head was lowered trying to catch the scent of the Dark Elves from among the flowers that were planted around the village. For some reason, the word “plodding” suited that figure, and it gave an impression that it was truly miserable. Was it wounded? If not, was it sick or even being affected by some kind of poison? They jumped at those hopeful observations, but that was no doubt just a kind of escapism while they were descending into a sort of extreme situation.

Do we shoot it? There's no need to think about provoking its wrath, not anymore. It's certain that it's coming this way. Then we should make the first move...bows can reach it. Besides, everyone has probably prepared themselves for the worst. If I can draw its attention, and then move so that I can separate it from the village...hold on? There is also a more alternative way to do it ...

“...it's oil.”

When Egnia muttered that, puzzled looks appeared on the Rangers around him for a moment, but they instantly grasped his intentions.

“That’s it! We can douse it with oil and set it on fire using a fire elemental!

“It’s got that huge body. It’ll be difficult for it to avoid the oil!”

“We’ll summon water elementals at the same time to make sure the flames don’t spread!”

There wasn’t much oil in the village. It’s not as if it was difficult to come by. Because its uses were limited, it was one of the goods they didn’t purposefully store.

Shouting, “I’ll go,” one of the dark elves ran off, heading for the center of the village. He probably intended to tell one of the Druids that should be in the storehouse. It would be bad if they were converting all their magic power into food, without knowing about the current state of affairs.

At that moment, the ’ursus Lord’s roar made the air tremble. The same one from just before that made them feel the overwhelming difference in power, but dark elves right now had resolved themselves and would no longer be shaken.

“What is it doing?”

One of the dark elves shouted curiously. It wasn’t just Egnia, all the Rangers there held the same question.

Because of the nature of Ankyloursi, it should have immediately charged them the moment they were seen, but there was no sign of that. It was as if it had no motivation— no, when it came to a Lord, it probably had more alternative objectives.

When they were examining the situation, this time the ’Ursus Lord stood up and roared.

Making oneself look big, and intimidating your opponent, was an action that wild beasts often did. However, what they didn’t understand was, why wasn’t it attacking?

Not being a mere beast, but a magical beast, the ’Ursus Lord was a fairly intelligent being. Even though it had visually confirmed that they were there and definitely weak, why was it threatening them, in spite of all that?

First, did those repeated roars just a short while ago have some sort of meaning?

“Hey, maybe this is just hunting practice for its young?”

If that was what that odd behavior was, it was possible and Egnia also mentally agreed with whoever’s voice it was that said it.

The parent would bring the child along when it went on a hunt, the child would learn by observing the parent's hunt, and learn the skills for taking each type of prey. There were many examples where, if it didn't do this, and left the nest without acquiring any hunting skills, it would die right away. The 'ursus Lord's mysterious behavior might be it trying to teach its child, that was watching from somewhere, about the food known as Dark Elves.

"If that's what this is, then considering the future, shouldn't we hammer it into the cub that Dark Elves are a tough quarry that can hurt you? It'll be a real pain if we're remembered as mere food."

"Won't the Lord go berserk if we kill its cub?"

"If it's a child it won't be tricked...by meat with honey poured over it. If this is hunting practice then it'll probably only eat live bait. But there's value in trying it, right?"

Suddenly, the 'Ursus Lord twitched its nose and started running in the direction of the dark elves.

That dejected appearance it had until a moment ago was already gone. Curiously, they couldn't feel a looming murderous intent. But, there was something different. Egnia threw his gaze behind the 'Ursus Lord for only an instant. He got a sense that it had the characteristic behavior of a beast that was being driven—

—There's no way that could be the case. First, there shouldn't be any being that could drive an 'Ursus Lord.

"What the hell... I don't understand what's going on here."

It wasn't just Egnia, many of his friends were also confused.

They couldn't read what actions the AnkyLOURsus Lord was going to take at all. It might have been a mistake to try and understand the magical beast that was the king of the forest, but this was the first foe their experience and intuition as Rangers had been useless against so far.

However, even with that confusing them, they crossed over one of the bridges and fell back. It was an undeniable fact that the 'Ursus Lord was running right at them. If they were even the slightest bit slow in taking action, they would become the 'Ursus Lord's prey.

The 'ursus Lord, who had now come to the base of the Elf Tree where no one remained, stood up.

It was gigantic.

A size that was more than enough to reach the height of the bridges.

And it swung one of its massive arms.

The attack violently shook the Elf Tree, and its trunk had been gouged out as if it had exploded.

The bridges connecting the trees bent, and the dark elves desperately clung to the sides so as not to be thrown off.

The outer circumference of an Elf Tree had been made especially strong. It was a specially made tree that had been raised by having its growth accelerated by using magic on it many times and giving it vast amounts of nourishment to grow big and thick. The giant tree that had the sturdiness to simply repel whatever monster charged it, had been reduced to this state in an instant. This was the proof, more than anything else, that the physical strength of the 'Ursus Lord far exceeded that of any other monster that had come to this village so far.

"You god-damned monster..."

"You could say it's just as powerful as we imagined it would be, but still...how dreadful it truly is..."

"—This isn't the time to be impressed. What are we going to do? What can we do that results in the fewest number of victims?"

From just a single blow, those who had lost the will to fight grumbled.

That was also unavoidable, after all, when witnessing firsthand a single blow that they themselves couldn't possibly match, where even just being grazed resulted in death.

Since a short while ago the 'Ursus Lord had been attacking the same Elf Tree as if it had lost its mind.

It was far too abnormal a behavior, but it didn't feel like it had lost control and gone mad because of magic. It was the kind of movement that made you think it held some kind of special grudge against Elf Trees. And sometimes it would pause and take a quick glance at Egnia and the other dark elves, before starting to attack the tree once more.

It doesn't feel like this it's teaching a cub how to acquire food...does it ...

There weren't any signs of a cub anywhere around the 'Ursus Lord.

Egnia glanced at the quiver hanging from his waist, and the arrows inside it.

Did some dark elf attack it, just to mess with it? Is that why it holds a grudge against Elf Trees?

The dark elves were the only ones who thought the Elf Tree itself didn't have any scent, but it wasn't necessarily true that monsters with an excellent sense of smell, like the Ankloursus, didn't notice it. But if that were the case, then if they

abandoned this village, they might be safe for the time being.

No, I can't imagine things going that well. It would get hungry after it spends a certain amount of time raging... and it might come after us by tracking our scents. We should give it the honey-coated meat, and pray that's enough to satisfy it, after all. But, what worries me is that it sometimes peeks over at us...as if it seems to be observing us.

The 'Ursus Lord really was throwing the occasional flickering glance towards them after all, and it attacked the Elf Tree each time it did.

"Could it be...that its objective is to keep us pinned down here?"

"So a different specimen is following it to the village from another direction?... Would it even need to do that kind of thing? An 'Ursus Lord?"

"It would be if its goal is to drive us out of the village, wouldn't it? Maybe there's another 'ursus waiting to ambush us at the place we escape to, or something."

"I've never heard of 'ursi hunting together...but if that's not what it is, then it doesn't make any sense, huh." Then we don't have any other choice but for everyone to flee in every direction? And if each person takes meat or some other food along with them, it'll probably quiet down while it's eating the food then?

"—Is that really our only choice?"

"Don't give me that look. It's not as if we're abandoning the village. It'll be fine for us to come back once the 'ursus is gone."

There were those who were being comforted, but they couldn't imagine things going that well.

That was because of the crunching sounds the 'Ursus Lord was making as it whittled away at the Elf Tree. Couldn't it be wanting to make this a part of its territory?

If that was the case, then there was no other way than for Egnia and the other dark elves to leave everything behind and abandon the village.

Through the effects of magic the growth of an Elf Tree was unbelievably fast. But even though it had grown this big so far, it couldn't be accomplished overnight. To the Dark Elves who lived together with the Elf Trees, losing one was the same as having everything stolen from them. How many sacrifices would they have to make if they weren't allowed to sponge off the other villages until they could once more raise a big Elf Tree?

"Okay. Let's leave the village while giving the honey-smeared meat to the 'ursus," everyone nodded in agreement with the Master-of-the-Hunt's words. "For the time being, Sumomo and Prune will prepare the honey-smeared meat.

The others will remain here and draw the attention of the 'Ursus Lord so that it doesn't go into the village."

The two young Rangers ran off towards the center of the village.

The 'Ursus Lord, who had already torn one Elf Tree to pieces and moved on to the next, suddenly stopped swinging those claws.

Faster than Egnia and the others could even think, "What is it doing?" the 'Ursus Lord started moving.

In the direction of the center of the village.

"Stop!!"

Egnia immediately drew two arrows from his quiver and nocked them. At the edge of his vision, he saw that his friends were holding their bows, ready to fire.

He simultaneously activated a Skill and fired the two arrows.

Both arrows hit the 'Ursus Lord's huge body—and both were repelled.

The next moment, many arrows were flying toward it.

All the arrows that were sent flying hit the 'Ursus Lord's face or forelegs and were repelled, and if they hadn't hit, they pierced the ground or trees right in front of it.

It was not that they had missed. Even if it had started moving, its body was just so huge. It would be harder to miss.

The aim of those arrows that had been loosed was not to deal damage to it.

It was to draw their foe's attention and to buy some time.

However, the 'Ursus Lord didn't stop for even an instant. All it did was sneak a glance their way.

"What the hell!"

—Our opponent sits at the top of the ecosystem, right? What the hell is going on that it completely ignores being attacked by lower-ranking beings like us? It doesn't view the weak as being weak? It's behaving as if it had some objective... has it attacked a Dark Elf village somewhere else before? Does it know that children and other weak people are in the center of the village? So it was trying to deduce its location by intimidating us? Perhaps it's because it learned this kind of hunting when it itself was weak, so rather than ignoring us, the 'Ursus Lord is aiming for the weaker targets!?

It was precisely because this kind of hunt had succeeded in the past that it would do the same thing over again, so it made perfect sense. That would hold true even if it had become one of those beings that took pride in their own strength known as Lords.

If you considered that, then it repeatedly attacking the Elf Trees was probably

to gather the ones who could fight around it, or some other such objective. When you thought about it that way, the contradictions in those odd behaviors vanished, and it all made sense.

And even that might be based on a successful experience on a previous hunt that went well. Be that as it may, at the point they had guessed that, there was only one thing Egnia and the others could do about it.

Not allowing the 'Ursus Lord to head towards the village center—where the children and the others should be.

“After it!”

The Master-of-the-Hunt didn't even have to say anything. Everyone jumped off the bridge and ran across the ground.

If you were to run across the bridges suspended from the Elf Trees, you would have to make small, but inevitable detours. It was extremely dangerous to run in a place where the 'Ursus Lord's paws could easily reach them, but they had no choice but to do it. On top of that—

—It was because, even if the 'Ursus Lord were to turn around and start attacking them, they would still be able to buy some time.

It seemed difficult for the large-bodied 'Ursus Lord to run through the rows of Elf Trees, and even if there was an overwhelming gap in their running abilities, it wouldn't have a lead over them—in running through the village. On the contrary, Egnia, who took pride in having the most outstanding physical abilities among the Dark Elves, succeeded in closing the distance between them.

He could hear screams coming from the direction they were headed.

It wasn't from someone being attacked.

It was because even the people in the center of the village had seen the figure of the 'Ursus Lord.

Goddamnit!

There was a place called the Plaza in the center of the village, but it wasn't on the ground. It was a place that looked like a wooden tray hanging in the air and was held in place by the bridges that extended from the trees.

When the 'Ursus Lord arrived at the Plaza, it rose up. When it spread those two thick, terrifying arms, it roared again.

It was louder than the ones from just a short while ago, it held more than enough force to make everyone in there freeze in place. The Plaza was separated from the ground for the time being, but the 'Ursus Lord's huge body could easily reach it.

The roar that made you feel the difference in status as a living being and that massive frame that terrified all who saw it. Those two together gave it a fighting power that left countless people—low-skilled, novice Rangers and children—petrified.

Egnia threw aside the Dark Elf-style compound bow and emptied both his hands.

These bows were the treasures of the Dark Elves. The materials used to make them were not from this forest, but were taken from the land where they once lived. There were few spare parts to repair them with, and they could never be made again. He would probably be reprimanded by the Elders for treating one so roughly. However, he didn't have the time to carefully store it away.

“UoOOO”

Egnia howled to raise his own morale and jumped on the 'Ursus Lord to try and draw its attention away from the crowd. When he clung to that huge body, he used the hard, rugged hide as a handhold to clamber up it as if he were running along its back.

“—GoO”

The 'Ursus Lord raged, twisting its body to try and brush Egnia off.

In an instant, his body stood out against the background, and it seemed like he would be pulled free and sent flying by centrifugal force, but he somehow managed to withstand it. He was able to reach the back of its head like that. The 'Ursus Lord's rage grew even more violent.

It was obvious as to why. Even a Dark Elf would probably act the same way if a bee was buzzing around their neck.

Egnia drew himself closer to the Lord's neck, as if he were stuck to it, and desperately endured it so he wouldn't fall off.

It was strange that it wasn't rolling on the ground, or scratching at him with those terrifying claws, but it was good luck for Egnia, and he should be thankful for it.

“What the hell are you doing! Run!”

He hadn't wanted to make a sound, but it couldn't be helped. In fact, the 'Ursus Lord's movements seemed to become more intense in response to his voice. Arrows came flying as if to hinder it. If it were someone with a skilled arm, then even in this situation Egnia would almost never be hit.

However, not even one of Egnia's shots had pierced one part of its hide. There was no sign that the arrows were wounding the 'Ursus Lord. If they couldn't even

scratch it, then even arrows coated in poison wouldn't have any effect.

Egnia poured strength into both of his hands. There was no way he could let himself be separated from the 'Ursus Lord, right now.

What felt like an abnormally long amount of time passed, and the 'Ursus Lord's movement became just a tiny bit slower. Continuing to rage had probably worn it out somewhat. However, their opponent was a Lord. Its toughness shouldn't even be in the category of common sense. There was no doubt it would recover right away and go on a rampage once more.

Egnia's hands were numb. He probably wouldn't be able to withstand the next one.

This—was his final chance.

He reached out one hand to his waist and drew the dagger that was there.

And then, in one breath he lifted himself up until he was at the distance where he could reach the parts of the 'Ursus Lord that looked vulnerable—its eyes and nose. It had parts, such as the neck, that didn't have armor. However, there was thick meat under the dense fur in those places. He had no confidence that he could deal any damage to it with the dagger he held.

At that moment, Egnia's body gently floated up. The instant he had released one hand, the 'Ursus Lord violently shook its body. Even though at the best of times he had finally been able to cling to using the full command of his body's faculties, there was no way he would be able to endure it in his current posture with one hand not holding on.

His field of vision was spinning around in circles, and he could hear screams coming from somewhere.

Shi—

Once he realized what was happening, he immediately threw away his dagger and reached his hand out to his waist. What he took out was a small leather pouch.

He was slammed against the ground. The impact had pushed the air out of his lungs and, for an instant, he fell into respiratory failure.

However, while there was pain, the impatience boiling up within him was stronger than that.

Egnia, who was lying on the ground, locked eyes with the 'Ursus Lord right in front of him and was glaring at him.

He couldn't move.

His body was petrified by the pressure coming from the 'Ursus Lord before his

eyes.

He knew it would all be over if he made a wrong move.

The breath expelled by the 'Ursus Lord reached him. That it had such an unduly pleasant scent was surpris—no, it wasn't at that level, it was more in the range of amazement.

Egnia felt like he was going to laugh.

There was nothing to think about nor hesitate over. He had already prepared himself for the worst.

Bring it on. I'll let you eat my flesh together with this.

Being eaten by the 'Ursus Lord was the worst thing that could happen. Because it would remember the taste of Dark Elf.

However, what if it didn't like the taste of Dark Elves?

He loosened the string around the mouth of the leather pouch he grasped tightly.

It was the poison that had been given to him beforehand. When he considered the size of the 'Ursus Lord, it was far too little.

However, even if it wouldn't be a deadly poison, it would be able to teach it the taste of that poison.

When it opened that big mouth and bit down on him, each of his arms would throw the poison-filled pouches into it.

It would be over if it attacked with its claws.

If he were bitten, it wouldn't end with just his arms.

Egnia had prepared himself for this.

No, he had decided a long time ago.

He lived, and died, for the sake of this village.

The reason he was stronger than the others was definitely all for this day.

Now come and get it. The dark elves of this village are gross enough to make you want to throw up.

The 'Ursus Lord looked away from him.

—What the hell is it doing?

The 'Ursus Lord, roaring once, swung its tail and arms. It then repeated those attacks on the surrounding Elf Trees as if it was venting its anger at something. It was almost as if it couldn't even see Egnia, but there was no way that could be possible. Because he sensed that they had actually exchanged glances.

"Egnia! Hurry!"

Unable to take in the situation, the confused Egnia suddenly noticed the voice

of one of his Ranger friends.

He was prepared to be eaten, but it wasn't as if wanted to be eaten by choice.

But would they be able to escape? The 'Ursus Lord appeared to not have any interest in them, but he knew that it was flicking its gaze towards them. He wondered what it could be after.

Is running away—the right answer?

He didn't have a clue. Their opponent wasn't transmitting a shred of its intentions.

When Egnia had reached the heights of confusion, an arrow that suddenly came flying by, struck the Elf Tree right in front of the magical beast.

"Koooooooooon," the shrill sound that was enough to give you goosebumps, clearly resonated and spread out like a ripple. All of the dark elves—even the 'Ursus Lord stopped moving, all around them it fell completely silent, as if someone had thrown cold water over everything.

Within that silence, a lovely voice resounded.

"Uh...that's about enough out of you,"

The whole world sparkled.

The figure that suddenly appeared from behind Egnia was a dark elf child. However, they weren't a resident of this village. They looked like they could be either an extremely pretty boy, or girl. No, if you looked very closely it was a shockingly pretty girl. In spite of himself—

"Cu, cute,"

Egnia, let slip.

How could a girl possibly be so pretty? It was a beauty that far surpassed that of the morning dew when it changed to droplets of water and fell from the leaves, struck by the light of the dawn, and sparkled like jewels.

It was as if she appeared to be emitting a blinding light from within. This was probably the cause of the world seeming to sparkle just now.

Moreover, it was as if the glimmer of life was enveloped in a smell that came from her movements.

Egnia's nose was twitching in spite of itself.

If he could take even just a tiny bit of that scent into his lungs, it would be to have it fill his entire body through the blood circulating in it.

What is this fragrance? It was as if each and every one of his cells were dancing in joy.

In the hands of that girl of unmatched beauty—she was wearing gloves, so not

being able to see those fingers was frustrating—

“How—“

—she was grasping a shockingly exquisite bow. That marvelous workmanship was definitely not just for display, it held more power than any other bow Egnia had ever seen, and his intuition as a Ranger was screaming at him.

But who cared about all that?

The unbalancedness of the girl having a bow that was out of proportion for that body became one of the factors that increased her cuteness again.

Everything about her was charming.

She was sparkling.

“Hey there, monster. Go on, get out of here. I’ll never let you do more violence than you already have.”

Cute.

Too cute.

Super cute.

He definitely should have heard it just a moment ago, but at that time that beautiful face had caught his attention, and he didn’t remember hearing her voice. However, this time his brain was properly responding to her voice.

It repeated over and over again in his head like a refrain. And every time it did he was on the verge of breaking out in goosebumps.

With a snap, that girl of unmatched beauty thrust a finger at the ’Ursus Lord.

Why, he wondered, wouldn’t she point that finger toward him?

It was frustrating.

It was regrettable.

He was sad that those beautiful eyes didn’t perceive him.

“Gurururuu”

The ’Ursus Lord growled.

That wasn’t a growl meant to intimidate prey. That was a growl out of fear.

The ’Ursus Lord was wary of that girl of unmatched beauty.

Naturally.

Whoever they may be, when a girl of unmatched beauty to this degree appeared right before their eyes, would shrivel up. They would think that perhaps she was a goddess.

Of course, there might be those who believed that magical beasts couldn’t have that sort of aesthetic sense. However, that way of thinking was far too foolish.

Egnia strongly denied it.

He had grounds on which he could deny it.

Magical beasts that possessed mighty powers were beautiful. If so then, paradoxically, it wouldn't be at all strange if this girl of unmatched beauty possessed absolute power.

That's right. There wouldn't be anything strange about it.

The instant the 'Ursus Lord gave a sign that it was going to try to move—Egnia opened his eyes wide in surprise.

The girl of unmatched beauty already had an arrow nocked on her bow.

After the girl of unmatched beauty had revealed herself, Egnia hadn't taken his eyes off her for even an instant. Even a blink of the eyes would have been sacrilege, and he shouldn't have done it even once. Nevertheless, an arrow was nocked on her bow.

No, it wasn't strange.

She was a girl of unmatched beauty who looked like the world itself had created her. That being the case, there was no doubt that she was capable of that much.

Egnia had that conviction.

A flash of light raced past him—

“GwoOO!”

—The 'Ursus Lord screamed.

He didn't care where the arrow was headed. More importantly than that, he didn't want to take his eyes off that girl of unmatched beauty for even an instant.

“■,■■■!? ■■■■■■■■!?”

“■■■!”

“■■■■■■!?”

The mouths all around him were saying something.

It was annoying.

Shut-up! I won't be able to hear that girl of unmatched beauty when she says something!

From the point of view of Egnia, who was trying to make out the girl of unmatched beauty's voice, it was all just excessive noise.

The footsteps of the 'Ursus Lord were fading into the distance.

“■!?■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■!?”

I said, shut up! How are you going to make up for it if I can't make out what this girl is saying because of you lot!

“...you okay?”

The girl of unmatched beauty was talking to him.

To he, himself. Not to anybody else.

To he, himself!

Egnia was petrified from excitement, and couldn't get any words out. Unable to think, he didn't know what he should say. It had even gotten hard to breathe. Even so, taking this kind of attitude was absolutely disrespectful.

That notwithstanding, mustering up all the energy throughout his body, Egnia squeezed out the most suitable reply.

"Kew, yuu, t."

"...Hm?...Eh?...What was that?"

The girl of unmatched beauty looked at him doubtfully. That expression was also unthinkable lovely. No, he was certain that if it were her, then any expression at all would be cute.

"My, my apologies. It seems that Egnia is confused from his fear of the 'Ursus Lord.'"

"Hmmm."

That was all the girl of unmatched beauty said in a flat voice, in reply to the Master-of-the-Hunt's words. And there, Egnia, who had finally recovered a little bit of sanity, blushed at his own blunder.

"Yeash! 'ootin', thn'kee!"

"...? Oh, 'thanks for shooting that arrow,' is what you're saying, isn't it?"

The Rangers around them also probably remembered the first thing they should say to that girl of unmatched beauty. When they came down from the trees, scrambling to be the first one to speak, they lowered their heads to that girl of unmatched beauty and voiced their gratitude.

"Yeah. You're welcome."

No.

That wasn't right.

He wasn't thanking her for saving him. He had to thank her for appearing before him—here.

"Yeash!"

"...Are you sure you're really okay? Did you hit your head really hard when you got sent flying? Shouldn't you get yourself checked out by a Cleric?...or would it be a Druid here? That magical beast might have had some kind of special ability."

"You're right. It seems that Egnia hit his head pretty hard, so it would be better to carry him."

He was carried away on a stretcher made from two wooden poles and rope. He

didn't have any pain from when he had been sent flying, but it was entirely plausible that the reason why he wasn't feeling any pain was just because of his excitement from seeing the girl of unmatched beauty. People were able to forget about their own pain and take action in extreme situations. That being the case, it would be reasonable that you wouldn't feel any pain if a girl of unmatched beauty were right in front of you.

To tell the truth, he wanted to accompany her. He wanted to breathe the same air as her right here. However, if he really were injured, the girl of unmatched beauty might be worried about him. Because she was this cute, it was common knowledge that even her heart was kind. So that was a situation that should be avoided.

As a result of his reason desperately persuading him that that was his own desire, Egnia decided to obediently be carried away.

While following the back view of the girl of unmatched beauty, who was talking with the Master-of-the-Hunt, Egnia thought.

...What is this violent throbbing in my heart...could this be...Love!!

Blueberry Egnia. At 254 years of age, it was his first love.

2

Aura followed after the dark elf who introduced himself as the village's Master of the Hunt. He was supposed to be the one who managed all the rangers in the village, but Aura felt like the man who collapsed earlier was stronger. But then, why did this guy name himself the chief? Even among the warriors in human society, only the strongest took on the title of the chief. No, maybe—

—are the classes different? Like, the one from before could be a warrior, while this one is a ranger. Or is he someone like Victim?

Aura came to an understanding after she remembered the Eighth Floor's Guardian, thinking this guy probably also had some specific duty to fulfill. While this thought surfaced, she tried to sense if anyone was behind her.

He was here.

And he would continue to be here.

A bunch of dark elves followed after Aura and the Master of the Hunt. There shouldn't be any casualties from the monster bear they had sent into the village. Perhaps it was because they had nothing to do for now, or perhaps they were stimulated by curiosity, they followed after their rare visitor.

Obviously, she didn't feel any hostility or killing intent from them.

Of course, there was a possibility that there was someone very skilled among them who could hide from Aura's senses, but Aura's intuition told her that there was no one like that here. In the first place, if there was a person here who was that strong, they could have easily killed the monster bear before Aura arrived.

...Looks like we are not exposed.

Right now, she thought no one in the village realized that they were the ones who had sent the monster bear.

Aaaaah, Aura thought listlessly. Why did Ainz-sama want to not let anyone from

the village die?

Her master's orders in a gist were, "infiltrate the village and prepare the groundwork for an amicable relationship."

The village would have been more grateful if she had saved them after a few people had died. Maybe some would have complained that "she should have saved us sooner," but such people would grumble no matter what she did. People like them who would be nothing but trouble for Aura—and consequently, trouble for Nazarick—could be wiped out when an opportunity presented itself.

For example, they could send in the monster bear again.

Hnnn. But I still can't understand Ainz-sama's thoughts. Considering his instructions, pushing them to the edges of despair and a dramatic rescue after would have been more effective...would Albedo or Demiurge have understood Ainz-sama's intentions better if they were here?

Aura couldn't understand her master's thoughts however much she pondered. Of course, there was probably no one who could understand the wise ruler, but that didn't mean she should stop thinking about it completely.

Their master wished for their growth. Furthermore, as the top brass of Nazarick, Floor Guardians were supposed to act as role models for every denizen of Nazarick.

Hnnnn. Hnnnnnnnn... maybe it would be troublesome if someone we killed could have been useful later, but Ainz-sama is probably thinking on a deeper level than that.

It was also the same for that monster bear.

When she asked if she should just kill it while the Dark Elves were looking, he replied that it would be wasteful and there was a big demerit in doing that.

Certainly, it was a rare specimen unknown to her and it also looked like it could be considered strong for this world. She agreed with her master's decision because they were uncertain whether they could find another strong specimen like it.

Sure, she was the one who proposed a way to put the monster bear to good use, but killing the monster bear would be better to allay the village's suspicions about them. Her master agreed on that point.

But, it felt like he refused because didn't want Aura to kill the monster bear with her own hands.

Since she wasn't informed of any demerits of that act, she continued to contemplate on the possible reasons.

With Ainz-sama's intellect, troubles or mistakes shouldn't occur if I follow his orders

to the letter. But, just following orders without thinking is not good...

If someone only followed orders, they would be second-class. Only those who could understand the intention and aim behind the orders and also bring about a better result could be considered first-class.

Albedo and Demiurge do enough first-class work to be praised by Ainz-sama. I can't lose to them. But...hnnnn... Maybe I should have used the weaker monster bears around this village instead of killing them all. Would that have been better?

Aura looked at the Master of the Hunt, who was walking ahead of her.

He was silent the whole time.

Normally, if the savior turned out to be a kid like me, they would be flooded with questions. I didn't even tell them my name. Is this normal for the Dark Elves? I don't think so, but...

It didn't feel like he hated talking with her or that he was just not in the mood for it. She couldn't feel a dismissive mood around him. His gait also supported her hunch.

He was making his steps shorter, slowing his pace down to match Aura's. If he could show such goodwill while also managing to hate her, he could only be considered a complicated person then.

He was likely just an untalkative person, or maybe he was not used to speaking with children.

Frankly, he was a failure as a host, but it's not like Aura wanted some kind of grand reception either so it would be wrong to criticize him on his quality as a host. Perhaps it was her mistake in not selecting a more amicable person to approach first.

—Seems like it can't be helped, I should just start the conversation from my side.

She should probably start with a conversation starter to relieve the mood, but with the short distance to their destination in mind, she went straight to the point.

"Elders, right? We are going to meet the people who didn't show themselves even with the monster bear's attack, right?"

"Monster bear? Is that how the Ankyloursus is called where you come from?"

"Hn. That's how we call it," Aura smoothly lied. "That aside, can you tell me more about the elders?"

"Aah. You were right, we are going to the elders' place now. We need not have walked if the elders were present with us there, but they were preparing oil inside their Elf Tree"

“hnnnnn. So, how many elders are there?”

The Master of the Hunt turned his head back for the first time to look at her.

“Ah, is it different at your place? There are three of them”

“The place I lived—A city far away from here, doesn’t have anything like an elder council as far as I know”

“I see. It sounds very different from our village. I’ve also heard the Elven city is ruled by a king...I heard that a city is like a village with more residents, so could it be something like having three elders just isn’t enough?”

“Well? There are barely any Dark Elves in my country, so I am not sure about those things”

Aura shrugged. She wanted the other side’s information, but didn’t want to give her own out as much as possible.

First of all, until she found out what kind of authority the elders wielded and what kind of people they were, she couldn’t just give random answers. Secondly, she couldn’t agree with his opinion about the city’s administration being the way it was because it required more people to properly govern it. She had her master as a counterexample.

If we had three Ainz-samas, it would be perfectly possible to rule the entire world without needing any of us...

As Aura thought about her master, the Master of the Hunt widened his eyes in surprise.

“...aren’t you here on a journey from the country of the Dark Elves?”

“Nn? That’s wrong. Just like I mentioned before, there are barely any Dark Elves in my country”

It was better not to give them accurate numbers, so Aura gave a general answer.

“It’s mostly populated by other races like Humans, Goblins, Lizardmen, Orcs, etc. We went through the trouble of traveling here after hearing people from our race lived in this forest”

“Is that so...”

Aura wondered about the heaviness in his response. She wanted to ask him, but decided that she shouldn’t be impatient and didn’t try to inquire further. She wanted him to notice the “We” in her sentence instead.

“But to think that many races can co-exist together...I am surprised”

“Is that so?”

It didn’t matter however many races there were. As long as there was an

absolute existence that stood above everyone, it would only be natural for everyone to bow down to said existence's grandeur. On the other hand, if there's a world where that didn't happen, it could only mean that such an existence was absent.

That was why they had to spread the name of Ainz Ooal Gown across the world.

Ainz-sama should rule over all the living beings of this world as the absolute ruler

This would give rise to absolute peace. If anyone desired such a world, they should bend the knee to the Supreme Being.

Aura felt pity for the Dark Elves who didn't know of her master. It was the type of compassion a civilized person tended to reserve for ignorant savages.

Albedo would probably get angry about their ignorance, but that would be truly cruel. The important thing is kneeling to Ainz-sama after learning of him.

But there could be one more reason why someone wouldn't bow their heads other than sheer idiocy.

It was either when the other party was someone on the same level as the Supreme Beings, or was under the rule of someone like that.

Supreme Beings were existences that rivaled gods, but unfortunately, similar entities also existed.

Of course, the Supreme Beings stood at the top of even such existences. In the past, they repelled those entities who came to violate Nazarick, it was also said that one of the Supreme Beings was the third strongest person in the entire world.

Yet, the fact that there were some who could rival the Supreme Beings in power was undeniable. That was why their master, the only Supreme Being who stayed behind with them, was being cautious.

I can understand Ainz-sama's caution because he is the one who has the most experience against them...I feel like there's no one like that here though... But I shouldn't be having such optimistic thoughts while Ainz-sama is being cautious...

If there was someone who could rival Supreme Beings, even if they hid skillfully, they would be at least moderately famous as long as they interacted with others. There were some similar existences in this world's history, but there were not even any rumors about such existences in this era.

It's conjectured that this area was at the edge of the wider world, so information was hard to reach here.

Demiurge said that we should continue to be on guard after all...

He said that it was hard to stop the information about the birth of the Sorcerer Kingdom from leaking out, so when the information spread to the entire continent, they could finally confirm the presence—or the absence—of Players. Therefore, as the Floor Guardians, they should keep their master's warning in mind.

He also said that opponents were most likely to appear in the chaotic situation caused by a war, and it would also be their chance to fish them out at the same time.

“We are not exactly on friendly terms with other races, but it's not like we are in a fierce conflict with them either. There are times when we stand in opposition trying to occupy a safe place in this forest, but there are also times when we have to cooperate because the monsters are our common enemy...Are the monsters outside the forest strong?”

She felt like the question “Is that why you are strong too?” was hidden behind his words.

“—Ah, Hn. Strong, I think? But, maybe not that strong for me?” As the man looked like he wanted to ask something, Aura interrupted him with a question of her own. “It looks like you don't know about the world outside of the forest, but how long has it been since you people went outside?”

“I heard from the elders that we came to this forest more than 300 years ago, but I have never heard about any Dark Elf who has headed out since that time”

“300 years? You heard it from others? That's a weird way to put things...Uncle, weren't you already born 300 years back?”

Master of the Hunt's expression changed considerably for the first time.

“—I am only a little bit over 200 years old.”

Aura suppressed her urge to take a long, hard look at the Master of the Hunt's face.

200 years? Is he trying to fudge the numbers? That, or the Dark Elves here count years differently...

She thought he was lying, but she couldn't say that to his face. She could already feel his mood becoming more dejected.

He was probably, no, certainly worried about it.

Aura didn't feel like consoling him, but if she wanted a good relationship with him going forward, it would be better if she did.

“Aa—, Hn. It's just that you exude this air of maturity...in a good way.”

“...No, don't mind it. It just shows how exhausting life in this forest is”

Aura didn't reply to him. If that's how he was trying to swing it, staying silent was the utmost kindness she could show him.

"Fuu—n...So don't you people feel like coming out of this forest? Like, to the country I live in?"

She was not clear about her master's intentions, but broaching this topic shouldn't have any faults. They could excuse it later as a joke if need be since these were just the words of a child. Also, her master was not someone who would scold her for something as small as this.

He would use [Message] to tell her if she did something he didn't want anyway.

"Maybe that's not a bad idea..."

"You sound very reluctant. Our country is great, you know? It's pretty safe and monsters like the one that attacked before don't prowl out in the open. You will face a different kind of hardship if you do come, but you will also receive different kinds of support as well. You don't have to toil as hard as you do now."

"That sounds like a splendid country. I can feel how good it is from the way you speak about it. Even so, it's difficult to shed our unease. Unease about going to a new place, and unease about whether we can continue our present lifestyle there...Maybe it's because I am mostly fine with things as they are, I think it would be better to stay put rather than going to all that trouble"

He replied earnestly to a child's irresponsible words. Maybe it was because he was a good and earnest person at his core, or maybe it was because he thought highly of Aura. Whatever the case may be, it looked like he would talk freely if she was the one to lead the conversation. A smile slowly took shape in Aura's mind.

"In that case, what if some people come over to test things out?"

"That's not a bad idea too...Will they go or won't they? If they will, how many? If we end up having to decide about it, the elders' opinions will play a large role...though there are a lot of people who oppose the opinions of those three."

"Eh?...the elders we are going to meet soon don't have enough clout in the village?"

The Master of the Hunt made a bitter expression.

"I don't hate them myself though.—We are here" They arrived before a tree that looked the same as the others around it. "I think you already know, but it's not that wide inside. Let's call the elders out—Elders, We have a guest!"

He raised his voice a bit. Gradually, three dark elves appeared and climbed down from the hole in the tree. The group consisted of two men and a woman.

Even though they were being called elders, they didn't look that old. When compared to humans, they looked like someone in the later part of their 30s.

It's hard to guess the Dark Elves' ages from their appearance after all. I already made a mistake by calling this guy an uncle... Ah, maybe I should have called him brother instead, but he really doesn't look all that different from these elders here.

While Aura was having such idle thoughts, the dark elves that followed them fanned out into a semi-circle behind her, surrounding them.

"Guest, these three are the elders of our village. Elders, let me introduce our guest to you. She was the one who fought back the 'Ursus Lord, a traveler who came from a country where different races live together in peace and where not many Dark Elves live in, a place beyond this forest"

Aura bowed slightly at the Master of the Hunt's words. Though, instead of a bow, it's more like a nod. She felt like her future status in this village would be jeopardized if she gave in too much. Even if Aura was a child, she was also the savior of this village. It would be bothersome if she was taken lightly because of her age.

Ainz-sama's directions were to become friendly with them, so would it be bad if I acted like I am absolutely superior to them?

"...I am Aura Bella Fiora. Pleased to meet you"

"Umu. You have done well in coming here, sapling from faraway, Aura Bella Fiora"

The man who stood in the middle—probably their representative—answered her with somber words. The gap between his appearance and his serious attitude was a bit striking, because he didn't really look that old.

Someone in the group of dark elves surrounding them suddenly spoke in a voice just loud enough to reach everyone.

"Shouldn't you be thanking the village's savior first? And why are you referring to our benefactor without honorifics so naturally?"

"Yes, that's right. They shouldn't have greeted her like that if they were truly grateful. Maybe they are being arrogant because the other party is a girl."

Some of the women raised their voices.

Frankly speaking, Aura didn't think the elder's greeting was rude. This was probably what people meant when they say that the same action can look different for people with goodwill and for those without.

The representative of the elders grimaced.

"Hmph. We were just about to give our thanks now—Aura Bella Fiora-dono.

We are extremely grateful to you for repelling the Ankyloursus Lord and for saving our village”

“That’s right. The younglings’ impatience is troublesome. There exists an order for the conversation to follow”

When the female elder who stood beside the representative said this, a woman somewhere else started murmuring.

“Your order of precedence is wrong in the first place. It would be bothersome if your brains are also getting fossilized as you grow older.”

Glancing at the Master of the Hunt, Aura found him making an expression as if he was having stomach pain. He was questioned about whose side he was on in the past, probably. The elder who stood on the right was also making a similar expression. The two other elders had grim expressions, the female elder began to direct her glare at the surrounding dark elves.

This... Maybe I have to carefully consider which side I should be on before deciding my course of action.

Normally, both factions would want to take in a powerful outsider like Aura. She needed to act in the way that was most beneficial to Nazarick.

The best thing to do was to probably ask their master for his directions, but there would also be times when Aura might have to take independent action because she couldn’t just wait for their master’s orders.

Everything would be far easier if Ainz-sama simply answered...

One of the reasons why he hid his goals was because he wanted them—the members belonging to “Ainz Ooal Gown,” including the Floor Guardians—to grow and was expecting them to be more autonomous. He wanted them to think and act on their own.

But that’s a heavy responsibility from Aura’s point of view.

Even if I make any mistakes, he likely intends to clean up after me with one of his usual awesome plans...

But that didn’t mean she was free to make mistakes.

To act without thinking just because their master was going to cover for them would be nothing but disloyalty.

As a Floor Guardian, as one of the aides on this mission, Aura had to think seriously and discover the path that would bring the most benefit to Nazarick.

That was why Aura couldn’t help but get exasperated at the dark elves bickering before her, showing their inner turmoil before a guest in contrast to how serious she was.

However, this was also a good opportunity. Depending on how she capitalized on this friction, it could turn out to be an important thing.

...Did Ainz-sama aim for this? No, there's no way. He couldn't have known that this village was having such problems. Then, to follow his orders to create an amicable position inside the village, I should...

“Excuse me—Are you intentionally trying to make me regret that I went to all that trouble over a long journey to come here? If not, can't you do this somewhere else without me? I would rather be shown things that I can boast about to my acquaintances from other races when I return back to my country and say that the Dark Elves' village is a good place”

The place suddenly went silent, as if they were just splashed with cold water.

A natural development. If they had felt even a little bit of shame at their actions just now, they certainly wouldn't want the news of it spreading to other races.

Aura felt like maybe she went too far. Even though she was the one who fought back the monster bear—the Ankylosaurus, she was still a child saying impudent things. She might have just turned both the factions against her, but she couldn't say that it was an absolute mistake either.

Aura was a traveler who saved this village. If they were to forget that and criticized her despite showing their disgraceful side a few moments before, they could only be considered people without character. It would be better for such people to become their enemies instead of friends.

Sure, her master ordered her to form an amicable relationship with the Dark Elves, but that didn't mean she had to be liked by all the Dark Elves. She couldn't see the full picture of his plans yet, but it would probably be better if the Dark Elves unsuitable for Nazarick were wiped out.

And even if I turn one faction hostile, the other faction would probably try to make me their ally. I won't mind that, and I can always make a third faction with me at its core if need be

Even if she ended up turning both of the factions into her enemies, she could see that there were people like the Master of the Hunt who didn't belong to either of them. She could make them her allies in the worst-case scenario, but she would have to apologize to her master if she had to resort to that.

“Ahem. Then, can we inquire the reason for Aura Bella Fiora-dono's visit to our village?”

“Fiora is my surname, so just call me that. I think you can already guess. It's

because I heard rumors about Dark Elves living in this forest. That is why, I came to meet people from my race. There are barely any Dark Elves in my homeland you see. So I would like to stay in this village for a while if you will allow me.”

“We don’t mind, but—alone?”

“For now.”

“For now?”

“Yes. I am good at moving through the forest so the others asked me to go ahead. Actually, according to our plan, they should probably reach here by...three days at the latest, I think. My brother and uncle should be joining us by that time.”

Of course, this uncle she spoke of was none other than their master, Ainz Ooal Gown.

“Uncle?”

“Hn. Actually, because our parents disappeared—” Aura continued while making a silent apology to Bukubukuchagama, “—uncle raised us”.

It was easier to tell a white lie but it could become troublesome later if they were found out, so she tried to keep it as close to the truth as possible.

“I see... Sorry for making you remember such a topic. So you came here alone—seeing that you are strong enough to fight back an Ankyloursus, a Lord at that, I can understand”

Aura was surprised as she expected more words of consolation.

Aura thought over it. This was the Great Sea of Trees after all, a place filled with danger. As there was no lack of children who had lost their parents, her story was probably not sad enough to warrant more consolation.

“Then, we don’t mind if you are planning to stay. We can lend you an Elf Tree if you want. So, what do you think?”

“Hn. Please do so”

“Understood. Someone—Apple. Lead Fiora-dono to a vacant Elf Tree. Can you do that?”

It was the Master of the Hunt who answered to that name.

“Of course. Leave it to me. I will lead her to the best Elf Tree in the village”

“Also, since uncle-dono and brother-dono will be joining us in three days, you won’t mind if we held a shindig for you all together then, right?”

“Of course. I will be in your care for a while then.”

“Now that’s done, Fiora-dono. Won’t you tell us the tales of your journey later? And we will also be happy if you would tell us about your country where there are no Dark Elves. We know absolutely nothing about the outside of the forest. Of course, we won’t force you if there are painful memories.”

Well then, what should she do?

Aura started thinking.

There were no benefits to revealing her true identity like an idiot. It could have helped with getting people’s attention, but it had no meaning now as she had already demonstrated her strength. That said, just like how giving out information thoughtlessly was bad, appearing completely reticent would not be good either. In that case, her only options were—to lie, to dole out the truth little by little, or mix the truth and lie in proportion...

I will have to discuss this with Ainz-sama and Mare to not create contradictions when they join us later, but it seems like I don’t have the choice of staying silent right now. If I told them to ask Ainz-sama, who will be coming later, they would be suspicious about my reluctance to talk...

She couldn’t let them have any suspicions in the present situation.

Until she could get a read on their master’s final goal, she should continue to work towards departing this place on friendly terms.

Hnnn. There’s no [Message] yet so Ainz sama is probably telling me to think of the answer by myself, but what kind of answer would Ainz-sama like?

“Fiora-dono, is something the matter?”

It seemed like she was silent for too long. Aura returned a smile.

“Aah, I was wondering if you will believe what I am going to tell you. Well, it’s probably fine to talk a bit about my home and travels. Like about the Trail of the Fey.”

“The Trail of the Fey? Isn’t that supposed to be just a legend?”

Someone among the dark elves surrounding them asked.

“...Things like the Moon’s Road and the Trail of the Fey do exist” Although, they’re inside Nazarick’s sixth floor, Aura added internally. “But I can’t talk in detail about these things with people who are not chosen by the Fey”

“Fufu. Sorry then. Fio...no, is it fine to call you Aura-dono?”

The female elder’s eyes were burning with passion. The answer was already decided. Although Aura didn’t really want to, she couldn’t refuse her considering her master’s orders.

“I don’t mind at all”

“Then, Aura-dono. I have been thinking about it since a while ago, but it’s a nice name”

“Thanks”

Aura replied with a pure smile. She was praising the name given to her by a Supreme Being. There’s no way Aura would refuse such praise. However, as she understood it was just them being courteous, she didn’t try to talk more about that point.

The female elder looked like she was satisfied with her response. She continued to talk in a good mood.

“So Aura-dono is also a Dark Elf chosen by the Fey. That’s splendid...Most of the people in this village are not chosen. That’s why they don’t know how we—the Dark Elves who lived in the North traveled to this place”

...Dark elves came here using the Trail of the Fey? Does it have an ability like that?

The Trail of the Fey inside Nazarick couldn’t teleport people over that big of a distance. They were either mistaking it for something else or maybe there was an entirely different Trail of the Fey.

Aura managed to draw out some intel, but she felt like she may have misstepped a little. On second thought, she denied that mentally. She would skillfully draw the intel out. And—

I will make Ainz-sama praise me!

Aura pumped her fist, filling her heart with resolve.



Aura headed to her lodging, led by the Master of the Hunt.

Ainz, who had been following her this entire time using [Perfect Unknowable], let out a sigh in relief.

A part of the relief was from the fact that no one strong enough to rival him had appeared and the other part was from how well Aura’s first contact went.

That said, he couldn’t be sure they weren’t just putting up a friendly act. People who could be so nonchalant about the fact that a child just traveled from such a far distance alone should have something wrong with their heads. They would obviously hide their feelings if they didn’t really welcome her.

Maybe he was overthinking it, but he wanted to make sure that they were not just acting. It would be simple if he could just kidnap someone like the elf from

before and cast mind control magic on them, like [Charm]. But, dealing with the aftereffects would be bothersome if he had to use [Control Amnesia]. Everything would be easier if he could just kill them though.

First, he should investigate the village's present mood.

A completely novel topic of conversation known as "Aura" had appeared in this village that didn't seem to have changed much for a long time. There was no doubt that the villagers were raring to talk about her with others.

Ainz wondered how honest the villagers were going to be when Aura wasn't around.

With Ainz using [Perfect Unknowable], this was their best chance to gather raw intel, free from any lies.

The three elders returned to their tree and the gathered elves dispersed gradually. The issue was which dark elf should he follow and eavesdrop on. He already noticed a few dark elf children about Aura's age—a guess based on their height—during the gathering.

Frankly speaking, he wanted to go after the children and hear their opinion on Aura.

But—he heard a voice saying "that girl" from the tree he was close to just a moment ago.

Shit! I should have been listening in on the elder's conversation!

He should snoop on the elders, who were more likely to talk about the most important things (important, but not for the matter of the twins making friends).

Ainz used [Fly] to smoothly float to the entrance of the tree the elders entered.

He couldn't find the elders when he peeked inside. The voices were coming from the top of the stairs that extended up from this room. He could hear them from here, but just to be sure, Ainz entered the tree and climbed the stairs with [Fly].

"Now then, how much of what that girl said do you think is real? She did imply that she traveled using the power of the Trail of the Fey after all"

The oldest of the elders was talking in a slightly different manner from before, but that was to be expected. Even Ainz would change his manner of speech depending on who he was talking with. Rather, the people he was more scared of were those who didn't act like that.

So this was how the elder talked with his friends.

"I don't think all of that was a lie. Wouldn't it be difficult for a little kid to travel such a distance without using the Trail of the Fey?"

“You can’t be sure about that. She is strong enough to repel that ‘Ursus Lord you know?’”

“Ara, isn’t that the strength of that weapon? You saw it right? That dazzling bow! That’s absolutely something precious! Maybe it’s something the Fey bestowed upon her”

The bow Aura used belonged to Ainz and was not considered strong in YGGDRASIL, but it was probably top-class in terms of gaudiness.

Maybe I should advertise Runecraft™ here too...

While Ainz was thinking, the elders continued on with their conversation.

“I wonder how long that child is going to stay here. I want her to stay here forever if possible”

“No, that’s going to be difficult. It’s more likely that she will immediately set out again after joining up with the uncle-dono and brother-dono later. Ours is not the only Dark Elf village. Maybe they will visit the other villages to establish friendly contacts. I don’t know why that child came here to meet us—her kin, but there’s no reason for her to stick to our village”

“That’s right. We should ask her in detail about why she came to meet us—the Dark Elves. That’s why we should make the welcoming party grand.”

“Aah, you’re right. We have to give them such a grand welcome that they will still think that this village is the best even after visiting the other villages. We should start preparing the foodstuffs in the next three days”

“Won’t the younglings dislike it?”

“No way they will. We are welcoming the family of the kid who saved the village you know? Even they should understand that they have to cooperate on this”

“You’re right...And we can probably use the welcome party to ask uncle-dono about the Trail of the Fey. He would probably talk a bit if he felt welcomed by us.”

“Yes. But I still hope she stays in this village.”

“...why are you so fixated on that idea? Is the fact that she may have been chosen by the Fey so appealing to you?”

“Yes. We—no, the people in the villages around us have already lost most of their Fey Blessing. If that child stays here...”

“You are not thinking about lording over the other villages with that, right? I will oppose everything you do if you are planning on that, you know?”

“I am not planning on anything that warrants your opposition. It’s just, if we

can learn how she received the Fey Blessing, maybe we can get ours back as well”

Ainz felt like the Fey they were talking about were not racial beings, but something closer to spirits. YGGDRASIL also had the concept of the Fey Blessing. Maybe the native Fey of this world had such abilities naturally.

It’s also possible that they were building into classes similar to Seelie court and Unseelie court. Those classes should have a special teleportation ability similar to the Trail of the Fey if he remembered correctly.

I should probably make sure of this thing.

He should also share this information with Aura.

The elders continued to talk while Ainz was thinking about this and that.

“If we can do that, the younglings will also change their opinion.”

“Anyway, don’t force the guests to talk about it. Not only that. Be respectful to uncle-dono and brother-dono who will be visiting us soon. I really don’t want bad rumors about this village and the Dark Elves to spread around when they return back to their country”

Ainz’s eyes—or the holes in the skull that pass for eyes—turned dimmer.

fumu... Is this village the wrong choice? I really don't want to let Aura be used as a tool in internal squabbles.

He would never let the children entrusted to him by Bukubukuchagama be hurt. Ainz felt irritated with the female elder.

...I should tell her not to get close to the adults...I just have to hope at least the children here are pure.

After hearing they had changed the topic to the welcome party and confirming that they were not suspicious of Aura, Ainz cast [Greater Teleportation]. After reaching his destination, he dispelled [Perfect Unknowable].

A-Ainz-sama. Welcome back.

Mare, who was waiting outside the Green Secret House, gave a little bow.

“I am back, Mare. Looks like everything’s fine here.” An Eyeball Corpse he summoned using [Create Undead] was floating beside Mare. Ainz looked around for the huge thing that should be there, but couldn’t find it.

“I see. So Fenrir isn’t back yet”

“Y-yes. Not yet”

Fenrir was entrusted with bringing back the Ankyloursus that ran away from the Dark Elf village.

If the dark elves had brains, they would try to follow the trail of the Ankyloursus to deal with it while they had the trump card known as Aura.

So, they would have to fool the hunting party's eyes first if they wanted to bring the Ankyloursus back to this temporary base.

However, the Ankyloursus was large and did not have any stealth skills, so it would be difficult for it to erase its trail by itself. Someone else would have to do it instead.

They found Fenrir to be suitable for the task. Fenrir had an ability called [Forestwalker]. The plan was to make Fenrir carry Ankyloursus here on its back so that there would be no traces left behind.

Of course, Ainz could go there and teleport back with it using [Greater Teleportation] or he could carry it with [Fly] like Narberal did, but Ainz had to go along with Aura to the village to gather intel. In case there was an emergency, he would also be responsible for exterminating the enemy or helping Aura escape, so they entrusted that task to Fenrir.

Looks like my prediction is off...I thought they would immediately send out a team with Aura to finish off the Ankyloursus...Maybe I should just fetch it myself if there's still time.

"I see. Then let's wait here for a bit. Anyhow, you are probably worried so I will tell you...well, you probably guessed it already seeing me returning alone. You didn't receive any messages from Aura right?" Mare nodded at Ainz's question. "Well, that's how it is. Seems like Aura infiltrated the Dark Elf village without any issues."

The twins had an item that enabled two-way communication between them. If Mare didn't receive any distress signals from Aura, it meant that she was safe. Still, it was possible that Aura wasn't able to respond to an emergency swiftly and ended up being incapacitated. They couldn't be careless.

There was also the fact that Aura changed to far weaker gear in order to blend in better with the villagers. It was far easier than usual to kill Aura in her current state.

The fact that Ainz didn't appoint something to guard her in secret while he knew this was because they as a group had decided not to.

After a discussion with Aura and Mare, they ended up choosing not to deploy any guards around Aura. This made Ainz worry so much that he would probably go unconscious from stomach pain if he had a stomach.

Ainz continued to regret it even now, wondering if they made the wrong decision. Perhaps there was a better idea out there. For example, Ainz could create incorporeal monsters using [Create Undead], maybe they should have

placed things like that somewhere around her.

There were two advantages to not having anything guard Aura. One was that they would be free to summon monsters that were more suitable to deal with the emergency situation that might arise. The other one was—

—It will be easier for Aura to forget about Nazarick for a bit if there's no one from Nazarick around, especially guards, who in a sense are her subordinates. She can interact with the Dark Elves in a more relaxed manner without putting on a bold front then.

—Maybe Aura could make friends then.

But, at present, a critical problem had risen in Aura's path to making friends.

That is, Aura ended up becoming something like a savior of the village.

He didn't think that *The Red Oni Who Cried* plan was wrong. He just didn't have any other method that could make Aura infiltrate the village faster and better. Still, the present situation had gone a bit too far.

Ainz couldn't have become friends with the members of "Ainz Ooal Gown" in the real world where they were not equal. Similarly, Aura, as the savior of the village, could not interact with the ordinary village children on their level.

Ainz had to bring her down to the same level as them.

Yes, that's right.

Ainz would have to pull Aura down into becoming just a normal child.

Ainz looked at Mare.

It was probably unfair that Aura was given a chance to make friends while Mare wasn't. He wanted to give a chance to Mare as well.

Aura and Mare were children entrusted to him by Bukubukuchagama. He should then treat them equally.

Of course, he should take their personal characteristics into account while nurturing them. That said, they should both be given equal opportunities.

First of all, it's absurd for someone like me who has no experience in raising children to think about things like these. Who should I go asking for advice on being a father... Ainz suddenly thought of Nfirea. *Not a bad choice. He is a good father. But—*

Yes. There's one problem with Mare.

And it's not his timid personality.

It's about Bukubukuchagama-san making Mare crossdress to match her tastes.

He already noticed that most of the Dark Elves in the village wore long trousers. There were also some who wore long skirts, but all of them were women. Furthermore, he felt like they were still wearing long trousers

underneath those skirts. He couldn't be sure as he didn't go around peeking under the skirts after all. Maybe those were tights, not trousers.

Aura explained that exposing bare skin was a bad idea when you live in a forest, so maybe that's why they were wearing trousers underneath.

[Perfect Unknowable] gets dispelled when you attack someone. No, to be more precise, it's when you do something that can be considered harmful. In that case...would lifting the skirt a bit and peeking under it be considered an attack?

Such a doubt never came to Ainz's mind until now.

Ainz took a quick glance at Mare's face.

"Ah, Eh, Wh-what's the matter?"

Am I an Idiot? What the hell am I thinking?

The non-degenerate side of Ainz—no, the normal side of him scolded himself.

Of course, he knew he couldn't do something like that, but his curiosity about an unexplored area of magic was strongly urging him.

—Stop! Me! What are you thinking?! Wanting to peek under Mare's skirt is already beyond the bounds of curiosity!

Although Mare would probably allow it if he asked—

—What am I even imagining?!

"Wh-what happened?"

"—Nothing, my mind just went to some weird places...I will probably try it in the future, but it's not a matter for the present and I will test it on someone else if and when I do it."

Ainz didn't feel the need to explain more to the puzzled Mare.

Anyway, Albedo was the better choice to experiment with—at least the more acceptable choice—compared to Mare.

Another voice inside him objected that Mare was different from Albedo. Ainz cleared it from his mind along with his prickling curiosity.

Anyhow, Mare will likely be marginalized for his dressing style. That should absolutely be avoided...but I wonder why he dresses like that... No, No, not that. That's not what I should be thinking about right now...it's Chagama-san's decision so it's absolutely wrong to tell him to change. It's wrong but...is it fine to ask him to change temporarily? It should be alright for Mare to live with Aura in the village if he stopped crossdressing...but...

Ainz never expected he would be put in such a difficult position because of the tastes of his friend in the past.

"You see, Mare. I have something to discuss with you..."

“Yes”

Mare looked at him with a serious expression.

...Chagama-san. Am I doing something wrong?

A pink blob surfaced in Ainz’s mind. He got a little irritated at the pink blob, which was giving him a thumbs up for some reason.

“E-excuse me...”

“...Sorry, Mare. I was thinking about something...” Ainz let out a sigh from his non-existent lungs and turned to look at Mare directly. “Mare. I want you to stop wearing female attire for a while.”

That was too short of an explanation.

Ainz understood this and continued before Mare could change his expression.

“Listen just as I said it will be temporary because you do know I am planning to take you along to the village to act as Aura’s support? So because the clothes you wear are too striking as a part of preparations for infiltration I hope you can change to different clothes for this mission.”

Ainz talked on and on at a hurried pace.

Mare continued to stare at Ainz. He was probably thinking why he was the only one being told to do so because Ainz didn’t say anything like this to Aura.

Ainz couldn’t get any more words out.

No feasible excuse came to his mind. Actually, it’s illogical to consider a man dressing like a woman weird but not vice versa. Did Bukubukuchagama think so far ahead—

No, it’s her taste—or more like her fetish. She is Peroron-san’s sister after all

His only option was to deceive Mare then. Luckily Aura also changed most of her gear and weapons because the equipment they usually wear in Nazarick was just too striking. He never thought that would come in handy in a time like this.

“I also asked Aura to change her gear a bit right? It would be bad if they were to get suspicious of our overly powerful gear. So how about it?”

This is underhanded...letting Mare decide is the same as pushing the responsibility onto him

“U-understood. Leave it to me Ainz-sama.”

“Is that all right?”

“Y-yes. If it’s for i-infiltration I think Bukubukuchagama-sama would understand”

“I-is that so. Umu. She would certainly understand our reasons.”

Ainz sensed Mare’s feelings for Bukubukuchagama through his devotion to his

attire, he tried to think how his friend in the past would have reacted in this place.

It's highly likely that she would just faint in agony and start apologizing to Mare...No, the opposite reaction is also entirely probable, I think...?

With this, he could probably consider Aura and Mare's friend-making plan to have proceeded into the final stage.

“Good, then let's complete our preparations and join up with Aura”

3

Aura stood holding a bow, at a place some distance away from the village. Made of metal, it was far more burly than the ones the Dark Elves normally used.

It was also taller than Aura.

Aura drew and loosed the string repeatedly, making the bow screech. It was a greatbow that originally belonged to the village, one that even the strongest of them weren't able to draw. The Dark Elves initially widened their eyes when they saw a child draw it so effortlessly, but they also immediately made expressions that said they had come to terms with it.

"The way this was stored leaves a lot to be desired. It's making all these sounds because parts of it have deteriorated, you know? Is this why no one was able to draw it? Hnnn, it feels unstable. I wonder if the arrow will really go where I aim it at..."

Her current target was called a 'Giga Horn Elk', a magic beast similar to an elk. Despite its huge antlers, it could move gracefully inside the forest using [Forestwalker]. This ability made its charges extremely destructive.

Aura would have probably looked like a stylish hunter if she stood still while passionately tracking her prey with a sharp gaze, but Ainz couldn't see any tension in her side profile—she was just being her usual self. She was nonchalant, like she was just about to pick up some random stone and throw it.

In contrast, the other three rangers from the village—two men and one woman—were in a completely different stance. They were hiding from the prey's senses, their faces the epitome of seriousness itself. Ainz didn't know how they did it, but they were also wiping out their presence by clearing their minds of all thoughts.

These dark elves had yet to nock their bows, although they were holding them.

Normally, they would all shoot at the same time to prevent the prey from escaping and to also reduce the chances of a disastrous counterattack, but they were not doing so now because they didn't want to get in Aura's way.

The fact that they all stayed on the ground this time showed their intentions.

Normally, Dark Elves positioned themselves on trees that were as safe as possible, fearing counterattacks from prey. They would then wait for the kind of prey they could deal with. Bushwhack-style hunting, so to speak. The fact that they were on the ground despite that, demonstrated their trust in Aura.

And what was Ainz doing as the one worst at stealth among the members of this hunt? The one and only [Perfect Unknowable]. He was using it so much that he started to feel uneasy whether he was relying too much on it. Anyhow, after he hid his presence with it, neither the prey nor the dark elves looked like they had noticed him. He had been following them this entire hunt, but Aura was the only one who sensed him.

Aura released the arrow.

About the same time—or maybe just a little later, in the time it took to blink—the Giga Horn Elk moved its head to observe its surroundings.

It probably noticed the twang of the bow that sounded out of place in the forest.

Ainz thought that should not have been possible as the sound was extremely low. Furthermore, the target was so far away that it normally couldn't have heard it, so why did the Giga Horn Elk react then?

It was most likely just a coincidence, or maybe it had some sort of special ability. If it was none of those then maybe—although it was just Ainz's conjecture—it preternaturally sensed the aura of an attack coming towards it.

But, for all its intuition, the arrow managed to sink into the Giga Horn Elk's head without resistance like it already predicted the monster's response before it was shot.

Even with the arrow sticking out of its head, its body twitched but did not collapse.

It didn't matter if it was a magical beast or just a normal one, animals as a whole had a lot of vitality.

It would have been a fatal attack if Aura had equipped her usual YGGDRASIL-made bow, but this bow borrowed from the village was just not powerful enough.

This clearly shows that the gear and weapons do greatly affect one's strength. Well, looks like Aura didn't use any special abilities this time, so maybe the results would

change if she used any.

The beast tried to leap away with the arrow stuck deep into it. Deeply wounded, it chose flight over fight.

Aura loosed another arrow without any hesitation, like she had already predicted the elk's reaction.

Pierced once more in its head, the Giga Horn Elk finally collapsed to the ground.

"Well, that's how it's done."

"As expected of Fiora-sama."

In contrast to Aura's calm, the nearest dark elf man raised his voice, full of passionate admiration. He's Plum Ganen, the village's vice Master of the Hunt and the leader of the hunting party this time.

Ainz didn't feel that he was putting on an act and even considered him as a strong ally for Aura in a sense. Nevertheless, he made Ainz's face twitch.

His attitude was just too positive.

His fiery eyes were filled with a mixture of respect, adoration, and passion—just like how that girl with scary eyes in the Holy Kingdom looked after her resurrection. Frankly speaking, he should not be looking at someone who looked at least like a child on the surface with those eyes.

This was the second time she hunted with this party and it was not like this the first time.

It was true that Aura fought back the Ankylosaurus, but Plum Ganen only considered that as a measure of her battle prowess and not her talent at hunting. In fact, while under [Perfect Unknowable], Ainz heard him saying that he proposed the hunt because they wanted to estimate her skill as a ranger.

But- the way Aura (effortlessly) traversed the forest gave Plum goosebumps, her ability to erase her presence bedazzled him, and by the time he saw her skill with the bow, his eyes started shining with admiration. It was a bit comical to see him standing there with his mouth wide open. And so, he ended up being the number one Aura fanatic in the village.

However, he was a painful impediment to Ainz's plan.

As long as someone like this existed, it would be hard to turn Aura back into a normal child in their eyes.

It could have been easily handled if this was just them cozying up to Aura to use her, but the fact that it was not the case troubled him the most.

Killing them is only the last resort after all...

“Hey now! You can praise me later, can’t you? Take it apart already!” “Yes! Understood, Fiora-sama!! Let’s do it, everyone!”

The two remaining dark elves, who were sending strange glances at Plum, also started moving out. They too admired Aura, but were able to remain cool-headed after seeing Plum’s extreme reaction.

The elk’s legs were tied with a rope, and the other end of the rope hung over a branch. They then pulled on the rope to try to hang the carcass upside down, but the elk’s gigantic body proved difficult for the three of them.

Aura reached for the rope and pulled it with a light “hoy!” The corpse that proved difficult for the three elves was easily raised up.

“As expected of Fiora-sama!”

Aura frowned a little at Plum’s praise.

Ainz could understand.

He nodded as the faces of Nazarick’s denizens flashed across his mind.

Getting praised for the wrong things made one feel bad, but getting exaggerated praise for simple things was also weird in its own right. They might end up thinking about whether or not they were being made fun of.

While Ainz was wondering if it was his lack of self-confidence that made him feel that way, the field dressing continued. A male dark elf put his hand over the prey, covering the carcass in something like a white fog. It looked like a special skill that froze the prey’s body. Ainz didn’t know any such skill from the ranger’s skill list, so it’s either a druid skill or something from other classes this dark elf had.

After that, they bled out the body and collected the blood in a bowl underneath. He heard that they did it to prevent the germs in the blood from multiplying. Maybe the aforementioned dark elf’s power wasn’t enough to freeze the entire body.

The blood collected in the bowl was also used for cooking.

During their first hunt, Ainz heard that they rarely took back the blood with them for the fear of drawing predators toward them.

They dug a hole and threw the head and entrails into it.

They would also take some of the offal with them usually, but the elk’s carcass was too large for them this time.

They stopped field dressing the carcass after that.

The Dark Elves’ custom was to perform the steps like skinning only after they had brought the game back to the village.

Although Ainz called it the Dark Elves' custom as if he was knowledgeable on hunting, if one were to ask him "what's the normal custom then?" he could only answer that he actually knew nothing about hunting. Maybe the Dark Elves' custom was the same as the common one.

The dark elves lowered the carcass to the ground and tied it to a pole. With a "heave-ho!" they raised it. It looked like they found it quite heavy. Although Ainz couldn't be sure, it looked like the adage "half of what you bag is what you get to eat" holds true.

Aura was not helping them carry it as she was entrusted with the task of guarding them.

The party started their journey back to the village.

Generally, a successful bushwhack hunt took a lot of time. However, thanks to Aura, this hunt has been completed relatively quickly, resulting in the joyful expressions on the dark elves' faces. Though the dark elves lived in the forest, leaving the safety of the village exhausted them mentally.

"—Fiora-sama was totally awesome. That was some great shooting today."

Plum was the first to start talking after they started to walk back. Those were not words of flattery, but what appeared to be his feelings from the bottom of his heart.

"Really? Well, maybe it's awesome for you people...but there's always someone better than the best. How should I put it...a relative?...nn— Maybe it's rude. Well, anyway, there's someone more awesome than I am. Ah! I was not talking about my uncle by the way."

"...I heard that the uncle-dono and the brother-dono will be reaching the village today or tomorrow, but are they excellent rangers too?"

"No, they are not rangers."

"Is that so? I thought they would be skilled rangers considering the two are crossing the forest alone...Then what kind of people are they?"

"...it's true that they are skilled people. As for what they are exactly skilled at, you will understand soon. Look forward to it. That aside, sorry, but can you let me concentrate on guarding the party? I can easily escape by myself, but with everyone in mind, noticing a threat even a second faster could be a matter of life and death, right?"

She was probably unsure about how much she could talk about Ainz and Mare, so she used a good excuse to cut him off. The question was how the other side took it.

Could someone really accept if the person you were having a pleasant talk with suddenly cut you off, even if the reason made sense? Wouldn't the person feel hurt depending on their character?

I think it's fine because he is a fanatic, but he is also someone powerful in that village. I should prepare countermeasures in case he starts to hate Aura and drag down the village's opinion of her...

Ainz thought that a fall in Aura's status in the village was not necessarily a bad thing at present, but it would be troublesome if it deteriorated too much.

But Ainz's worries were useless, just as he had predicted.

"Please forgive me! To think I didn't notice it!"

Plum bowed with a tremendous force. If he weren't carrying the carcass, he would have probably performed a dogeza—or some Elven form of apology equivalent to it. This kind of excessive response was why he was thought of as a fanatic.

"Aah—Well, you are moderately skilled yourself so you probably would have noticed it normally right? Looks like you were taking it a bit easy because I am here, but that only means you think highly of my skills, right? I am happy about that, but I want you to pay a bit more attention to time and place"

hooo—She is good at consoling someone from a superior position...Maybe that is her experience as a Floor Guardian speaking. I feel a bit happy if this is a sign of an NPC's growth...Or maybe is it something Bukubukuchagama-san left in her? That would be a thing worth celebrating in its own right, because it's a sign of Chagama-san living through Aura.

Imagining a pink blob behind Aura—which certainly doesn't make for a good picture—Ainz's immovable face made a smile.

The party heeded Aura's words and continued their journey back without disturbing her. And like that, they reached the village without being attacked by beasts even once. After he confirmed that they had reached the village safely, Plum raised his voice.

"—Everyone! Rejoice! Fiora-sama bagged a big one this time as well."

Ainz clicked his tongue.

He expected this would happen, but also realized that he could do nothing about it. It was natural for hunters who headed out into danger to be proud of their kills, and it was also natural to let everyone know who hunted it. Plum probably did it especially because Aura was an outsider, in order to make her position better.

But Ainz didn't wish for such goodwill.

Villagers who were walking across the walkways spanning the Elf Trees gathered together, looking at the massive carcass with looks of admiration.

"Okay then, I'll be going back."

"Yes! Please leave the remaining work to us Fiora-sama!!"

Leaving the work to Plum, Aura headed to the house the village lent her.

He wanted to go after Aura, who was walking back alone, but he couldn't do that. He needed to know how Aura's position was changing inside the village.

Aura continued to walk, only turning her head back to look for Ainz who stood still, floating in mid-air.

She looks so lonely...

Maybe it was just Ainz being too sentimental, but that's what her side profile told him.

In this village, there were people who looked at Aura with awe and there were people who respected her, but there were none who approached her as a friend.

She was not being seen as a girl on a journey, but as an existence above them all and someone to bow to in respect. Just like Ainz had thought before, that was not a bad thing in and of itself.

But, it was bad for Ainz's goals.

I have to turn Aura from being the village's hero to just a regular child...but that's difficult whichever way I look at it. If I try to undermine the position she built up before I reached this village, I will be turned into a pariah instead...well, that's natural. After being helped by her, the village will obviously value Aura more than the relative who came afterward.

Ainz remained in that place as the other Dark Elves started to gather one by one. Naturally, there were also Dark Elf children around Aura's height in the group.

The carcass was being divided up and handed over to the villagers to cook.

"Now, remember to be grateful to Fiora-sama for hunting this!"

Every time a Dark Elf received their portion, they spoke words of gratitude with their faces full of smiles.

Even skilled hunters like Dark Elves cannot succeed in every hunt. It would appear that getting hold of such good meat was a rare occasion. Ainz heard about this the last time he listened in, or maybe it was the time before that.

The huge pile of meat was gradually portioned out, becoming smaller and smaller. The fanatic Plum continued to say this every time he handed out a

portion to someone: “be grateful to Fiora-sama.”

Just as Ainz had repeated, he had no complaints about the act itself.

It was true that Aura hunted the prey, and it would be more offensive if someone was not grateful for that, but even so—

“As expected of Fiora-sama. She should be the one to lead this village.”

“Aah, absolutely. Not only did she drive away the Ursus Lord, but she is also a first-class hunter. The village would be in safe hands if she were to remain here, but...”

“No doubt, no doubt”

Five dark elf adults gathered around Plum and continued to talk like this.

Their praise for Aura gradually increased. The fact that the children who gathered were also listening was extremely problematic.

“...But Fiora-chan is still a child you know?”

A dark elf male, who smelt of herbs, said suddenly.

The expressions of the fanatical gathering changed at once.

“That’s the same as those elders’...those old farts’ way of thinking!”

It was an angry exclamation.

Plum, who had been smiling a few moments before, now looked completely different, breathing wildly.

“What is age? Is just being older something great!? No! Certainly, there are people who have accumulated experience and have become skilled with age, but that’s not something that naturally comes with age. Age cannot be the absolute yardstick we measure everything against—But, you see! Only ability can be absolute!!”

Ainz agreed with that opinion.

He saw it many times at his workplace. People who were good at something were good at it from the start, while those that were not would never become good no matter how many years they spent on it.

“Superior talent! That’s the only power that can protect the most people in this dangerous place! Only ability is absolute! Even if it is someone young!”

“But...Isn’t Fiora-chan a bit too young?”

Another fanatic replied coldly to the woman who objected, “isn’t that how those elders think? So you are the same as those elders, huh”

“—Haa?”

The woman looked at the dark elf with hostility. Ainz could clearly see that the elders were very much hated.

Frankly speaking, I feel like they are not doing anything that could cause so much hate...

He didn't understand the reason why the younger ones had such a bad opinion of them, but it's been only two days since Ainz started observing this village. It's not like he was observing everything either, so Ainz may have just missed it.

"In order to reject the ideology of the elders—that which prioritizes one's age—should we not instead defer to talented Dark Elves like Fiora-sama and even possibly make her lead the village?"

Stop, please.

Ainz grimaced.

This was not why he sent Aura into the village.

If Aura heard this and if he was unlucky, she might just agree with them and proceed to bring the village under her rule. You could even say that this was a great idea for Nazarick's expansion, but this was not what Ainz desired.

Ainz turned his gaze to the children watching the adults' quarrel.

Unlike their expressions of joy at the food before, their faces were now clouded with unease.

This is the main problem...

Ainz wanted to make friends for the twins.

Unlike the children in Suzuki Satoru's world, the children of this world—like Nemu—could approach Aura with innocence and curiosity. However, from what Ainz had witnessed and from what Aura had said, there was no one like that here yet.

Maybe they were used to suppressing their curiosity because growing up in a dangerous place like the Great Forest required them to do so. However, what was more likely was that they sensed the adults' attitude towards Aura and formed an image of her as someone who lived in an entirely different world from them. In their eyes, Aura was a child who was also not a child.

He had even felt like he should directly intervene and make the village's opinion of Aura fall just so the children could approach her.

It's probably hard to be intimate with...no, friendly with someone deeply respected by the adults... For example, even if the object of respect doesn't differ much from their age...or maybe it is all the more awkward because she is the same age? At least in the conversations I snooped on, I didn't hear parents telling their kids to not approach Aura or ordering them to treat her with the utmost respect. But is that a good thing, or a bad thing?

“Haa...”Ainz ended up letting out a sigh.

There was no way they could make friends if this continued.

In that case... should I make a move here and directly ask them to become friends? But I can't be sure that would lead to a good result... Or maybe I should just hope that the situation will change. I wonder if every parent has to go through such hardship...

Pondering over the same question as he had before, Ainz activated [Greater Teleportation], clutching his head at the final words he heard before he teleported.

“—First of all, what do you mean by Fiora-'chan'? It should be Fiora-sama!”

4

A dream.

I am having a dream.

I know this is a dream.

What was it called again?

Yeah, right. A lucid dream.

A dream where you are aware that you are dreaming.

I am a kid in the dream.

And—I was sent flying.

It doesn't hurt. Yes. It doesn't hurt because this is a dream.

Yet, it hurts.

My face throbbed with pain. I probably have a cut inside my mouth from the impact.

It tastes full of blood.

I can taste it even though it's a dream.

Strange.

Is this really a dream, I wonder.

A hand came into my view.

A small hand covered in dirt.

So it's a dream after all.

My hands are no longer so small.

I am relieved.

This is just a dream.

My vision moved.

—no! I don't want to stand. Yet, I stood.

I stood again, picking up the club I dropped.

Mother is standing before me.

She is expressionless. It's like she was wearing a mask. She is looking down at me with cold eyes.

She held a club in her hand, to beat me until I won't be able to stand anymore.

And then she swung it.

The present me could take it, but it was impossible for me at that time.

Just as I started to feel the pain, I'm flying through the air.

More pain coursed through my body after I got knocked to the ground.

My vision blurred.

It's the tears.

Suddenly, I wondered how long it had been since I last cried.

My gaze moved once again.

Mother is saying something.

I look at the club on the ground that left my hands at some point.

Mother probably told me to stand.

But I can't.

It's painful, and difficult.

I probably replied something to that effect while crying.

Mother's expression didn't change, but she slowly lifted her club and took a stance, like she wanted me to see her doing that.

I hear a voice.

I move my eyes, and I see a plump woman running towards us.

She is someone who helped with our household work. She made delicious food.

It's aunt Nazaire.

Her runny omelets were excellent. They were my favorite. Her cooking was the taste of my memories, and also the standard by which I judge other food.

Unfortunately, she has already passed away. If I am going to dream anyway, I would rather dream about eating her food instead of training with my mother.

I later learned that mothers are supposed to cook, but I don't have any memories of eating my mother's cooking. But I do remember someone saying that she likely had her hands full with my training.

I accepted that explanation back then because I was ignorant.

But now—after becoming an adult I can say for sure that was wrong.

I don't even have many memories of eating together with my mother. Most of my memories were of me eating alone.

"Good morning..."

Color returned to the world. Am I going to wake up? They should have woken me up

sooner.

It's not like I forgot about it.

Yes, I can understand.

My mother hated me.

She probably found the child born from her rape extremely unpleasant.

So, my mother never celebrated my birthday.

I never received any words of encouragement from her.

Like "thank you".

Or "congratulations".

Or "Isn't that great!".

Even such common words.

In the first place—did my mother ever call me by my name?

I wonder who named me.

But, if she really hated me she should have just killed me.

She could have easily done that.

But I was not killed.

So, it stands to reason that I was not hated.

Maybe it's nothing more than a pitiful hope of mine.

"P-please hold, Faine-sama. She is still a child. It's not good to continue her training in this state"

Aunt Nazaire does not back down even after receiving mother's glare.

Thinking back, aunt Nazaire wasn't an ordinary person either.

"S-she will need to rest soon. I will prepare drinks..."

"She's fine."

"I will tend to her wounds while Faine-sama's having a drink so..."

"She's fine."

All of my wounds were healed by a wave of mother's hand.

The pain went away as well.

"You are fine, right?"

Mother brought her face closer.

A pair of glass-like eyes and a face devoid of any expression. Repulsive.

"...yes...I feel fine"

"That's right," mother turned to aunt Nazaire. "...are you satisfied? She is still alright, and she is already strong enough to withstand resurrection anyway. See? There's no problem at all"

"...Yes. Underst—"

“—Good Morning...Excuse me, is Zesshi-sama in there?”

She faintly heard a woman’s timid voice. This was not a voice inside her dream. It came from reality.

Her consciousness broke through the surface.

She could see the ceiling. This was her own room. There was a presence of a person in the room, besides her. Maybe it was because she wasn’t fully awake, but she couldn’t feel any hostility from the person.

“If I am going to dream anyway, at least let me dream about something magical...” she whispered. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. Feeling something moist on her fingers, she realized that she cried at some point. “—I woke up, just now. Can you wait a minute?”

“Hiyeeee! Please don’t worry about a lowly person like me! I will wait however long it takes, so please take your time!”

She didn’t say a single thing to threaten the woman, but she was extremely scared. Feeling like sighing again, Zesshi rose from the bed and put on a coat that hung on a nearby chair.

She knew who came to her room from their voice.

Zesshi felt like she didn’t need to take time dressing up as the visitor was a colleague of the same sex, and it would be rude to make her wait in the next room until she got completely dressed up.

When she opened the door to the next room and entered it, she found the visitor standing there like she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“—Sorry for making you wait. It would have been fine if you took a seat”

“No, no, I didn’t have to wait for long at all. That said, heheheh. Sorry for disturbing Zesshi-sama’s rest. I would be glad if you could forgive me.”

She servilely bowed with an amicable smile on her face. Also—probably unconsciously—she even started rubbing her hands together. For one of the trump cards of the theocracy—the 11th seat of the Black Scripture, with the title of “Infinite Magic,” and one who reached the realm of heroes—this behavior was too pathetic.

“So then, won’t you take a seat?”

“No, no, no, no. That’s not necessary. I will return immediately after giving the message so something like sitting on Zesshi-sama’s sofa...”

She shook her hands in a fluster.

She didn’t have to reject it so vehemently, Zesshi thought.

“Nothing will happen just because you took a seat, and it’s not like I will get

angry you know? No, I really won't...you don't have to be so abject...aren't we colleagues?"

When she heard that, an obsequious smile floated to the woman's face.

"Ehehehe, I apologize that Zesshi-sama has to call a worm like me her colleague."

"No, you don't really have to go that far... You see. Among the people I've dealt with—among the members of the Black Scripture that I had mock battles with, you are the most servile you know? ...to think that you used to be so conceited."

The Black Scripture was a gathering of heroes. Therefore, occasionally some newcomers would think too highly of themselves. One of Zesshi's duties was to break them in. Therefore, even though all of the Black Scripture were her colleagues, she was only acquainted with the haughty guys.

That said, it was something she did to every member of the Black Scripture who grew arrogant, so it's not like this woman was special. Even the captain, who she disciplined harder than this woman—she sometimes even regretted that she might have gone too far with the captain—treated her normally now. Yet, only this woman acted like this.

Maybe just getting broken in was already a bit too much for this woman.

I should take into account things like their personality next time...

"It's bad to be arrogant, but couldn't you at least act a bit more confident?"

"Heh, eheheh. I can't do such a thing before Zesshi-sama"

She started rubbing her hands even more intensely.

Zesshi thought she didn't do anything that would make her go this far.

She only advanced while taking the woman's magic head on, mounted her, and just single-mindedly punched her in the face—and because it was supposed to be training—took care to not kill her while beating her into a pulp.

Zesshi had seen her not recognizing her defeat, throwing out her spells even when pinned, so she admired her as someone with a spine. Since then, she had even learned to cast spells while bearing the pain. She was someone with a desire to improve herself.

Zesshi felt a little sad seeing a person she had high opinions of acting like this before her.

"...And so, what's the matter today? Though I have an idea what it is about"

"R-right. As expected of..."

"—Aa, enough with the flattery."

"Ah, Y-yes. As the elf subjugation army started advancing further, I was

entrusted with informing Zesshi-sama to start her preparations to head out.”

“Is that so...”

The woman’s face twitched when she saw Zesshi smiling. Zesshi wondered why because she wasn’t making a scary face but just smiling normally.

“I wonder if I could clear one of the bones stuck in my throat at last.”



Intermission

Upon amassing even greater magical power, the entity formerly called an Elder Lich would advance to a more powerful existence called a Night Lich. Only a few of such beings were recorded in the annals of history, a fact which many people were grateful for.

It is because Night Liches were tremendously powerful beings.

They could use multiple spells of the Sixth Tier—a tier said to be beyond the realm of humans. With that much power, they could even hold their own against the older high dragons. In addition to that, they also possessed many special abilities, counted many undead as their followers, were highly intelligent, and took residence in impregnable fortresses.

With all of their accolades, it's as if they were the rulers of nations, existences worthy of being called the Lords of the Undead.

In fact, the renowned Three Night Liches—

The Draconic Night lich “Q’fantera=Argolos”

The Night Lich Titan “Hueon”

And a Night Lich (probably) a lord of the shadows known by his moniker of “Fear.”

—famously ruled over domains the size of small kingdoms and were dreaded existences who inspired fear in the countries around them.

And thus, Night Liches were considered beings straight out of myths and were whispered about in tones of fear and awe. They were the same as natural disasters to the people concerned.

One of these fearsome Night Liches who moved behind the world's veil with the nickname of “The Abyss”—Banejieri Anschass came out of a huge room while bowing.

With six arms and two heads, proficient not only with arcane spells but also

spells from other systems, this night lich was a fearsome being that humans could never dream of defeating. If he ever chose to act openly, the aforementioned Three Night Liches would probably have to become Four. He was an ancient undead who was the founder and a member of the innermost core of that organization.

The organization was called the “Corpus of the Abyss.”

Formed by undead magic casters, this gathering’s original goal was to cooperate among themselves so that their interests would not clash.

That said, it was inevitable for immortal beings like magic casters who spent an eternity researching magic to come into conflict with beings similar to themselves.

The undead tended to have some other desires in place of the three basic desires absent in them. For undead magic casters, it generally manifested as a desire for knowledge. So, when there was a conflict with a piece of knowledge at stake, they were prone to not hold back, resulting in fights to the death.

Hypothetically, if one concentrated all three of the fundamental desires of the living into one, someone with that singular desire would also find it extremely difficult to restrain themselves.

There were many undead who had met their end because of this, though other times the living would seize the opportunity to eliminate both combatants.

This resulted in more and more undead who realized that it was better to share instead of trying to monopolize knowledge or magic at the cost of their life. If it was not possible, they should bargain amongst themselves. And so, they created a list of names.

That’s the tablet known as “Graniezzo Inscription” in the later times, a stone tablet that contained the names of many beings adept at magic even though the tablet itself wasn’t magical in any way.

(T/N: Graniezzo was TL’d as Granisle in the bonus volume probably since it was JP-CN-EN)

It only contained the names of four Night Liches and three Elder Liches at first, and the only obligation of the organization was that the other members should band together to thrash any member who violated the rules.

After 200 years, the organization and its rules developed into a comprehensive system.

The undead membership of the organization increased: a total of 7 inner circle members and 48 in the outer circle. Now, this was a large organization of 55

people in total, of which the undead of the inner circle were supposed to reach difficulty levels of 150.

But, there were very few who knew about this gathering.

The undead of this organization were generally divided into two types.

One group increased their power among the living and used them to achieve their objectives. The other group didn't interact with the world of the living and worked toward their goals silently out of sight of the world at large.

As the former were very few in number compared to the latter, this organization never took action openly in the world of the living.

If someone increased their power among the living like the former group, that also meant there would be an increase in the amount of enemies they had as well. Especially as the undead were considered the enemy of all living things, these particular types tended to get eliminated by the living who'd even set aside their national allegiances for that cause.

This led to a reduction in the former group's numbers. Of course, there also existed undead who managed to gather power among the living while remaining in anonymity, but such talented undead were rare.

As a result, "Corpus of the Abyss" remained an organization that was shrouded in mystery and only talked about in rumors. The reason the aforementioned three extremely strong night liches were not invited to join was because their addition to the ranks would make them stand out too much.

Upon leaving the room where *that one* sat, he came to a wide corridor by the side of which was a room illuminated by a small light.

It was the waiting room for those waiting to meet *that one*. *That one* would never prepare something like this—it was not kind enough for gestures of that nature—so Banejieri and others petitioned for it and received its permission to make one themselves.

The person in that room called out to Banejieri.

"So you have returned. It should be my turn next."

As Banejieri had waited together with them in that room just a while ago, he knew who the person talking to him was without seeing them. In fact, one wouldn't enter here without being summoned—because it would anger *that one*—so they couldn't be a surprise visitor anyway. The only ones summoned here today were the members of the inner circle. After 400 years had passed since the founding of the organization, there were 9 members in the innermost circle at the present.

“The Abyss,” “The Saintess of White,” “The Death Rider,” “The King of Decay,” “Crimson-Eyed Duke,” “Wise Wolf,” “The Elder of the Hosts,” “The Eaten,” “The Revenant of Yellow.”

All of them were gathered here earlier and were summoned in turn. There was only one left now.

“The Saintess of White,” Grazn Rocker.

An undead with skin like white wax who wore a white veil and dressed in white. An appearance that was completely white from head to toe.

She was someone who had reached the Eighth Tier of magic and was aiming for the Ninth now. Banejieri could not help but recognize her as the better researcher. She was also the favorite of the organization’s present leader.

No—

—That one *doesn’t like anyone*. That one *only finds everyone unpleasant but bears with it so that one can use them*.

He could sense as much from his conversations with *that one*.

That one didn’t try to hide this at all, even calling the magic Banejieri and others use, “filthy.”

So being highly valued was nothing for Grazn to be happy about.

No, *that one* only ever took from them and barely gave them any benefits in return. There shouldn’t be anyone who could be happy being used by *that one*.

This was even truer for a talented researcher like Grazn.

Of course, no one would express their feelings before *that one*. Regrettably, there was no chance of victory even if all of them were to rebel against *that one*.

“...Aah. You are next. After it’s done...won’t you have a talk with me? It’s been a long time after all”

“...What do you mean?... I see. Understood. I got it. Of course, I will happily accept. The usual place right?”

“Yes. I will be going ahead then.”

Banejieri left her and walked through the darkness for a while, something he could do without discomfort only because he was an undead. There was no need for that light in the waiting room either. He didn’t know who arranged it, but that was probably just for decoration.

The floor was a single slab made smooth by magical means, but the ceiling and floors were still rough, unhewn stone.

This huge cave was not natural. The leader of their organization had spent time and effort excavating it.

They visited this cave once every few years—or when they were summoned—but he couldn't help but sneer every time when he saw the effort spent in digging such a cave.

Night Liches who were good at magic generally looked down on physical labor, but this scorn was more for what this cave represented: the cowardly side of someone who acted so high and mighty before them.

After he made sure that he put some distance between him and the room, Banejieri activated [Teleportation] twice to reach his destination.

He arrived before a castle built deep into the mountains. It was the residence of Krunui Log Entesh Na, "Crimson-Eyed Duke" of the inner circle.

Among the inner circle, Krunui was the one who loved keeping things neat and tidy the most and surrounded himself with the best stuff. That was true for his residence too.

This castle was built by the labor of different races—paid with the knowledge of magic, magic items, and treasures filled with gemstones—was so grand that even someone without an aesthetic sense could appreciate it. That was the reason why the inner circle used his residence as the meeting place whenever they had something to discuss.

Upon reaching the gate, one of the undead under Krunui appeared and led Banejieri into the castle.

After being led to a room, he found that everyone from the inner circle except Grazn was already present.

"—Sorry for the wait."

"Good work dealing with *that one*."

The one who spoke was the lord of the castle, Krunui.

His most striking feature was his extremely pallid-looking skin. He was not a natural undead, but a former human who turned himself into one using magic. Maybe that was why they could see traces of his past self in his obsession with surrounding himself with fine things. While the others always wore the same clothes—magic items with copious amounts of magical power—he alone wore a different spotless outfit each time, but his clothes did not have any magical power.

For other members, clothes were something used for strengthening themselves, but for Krunui, they were things to decorate himself with.

"I want to wait for Grazn before we start. You don't mind right?"

Banejieri asked his comrades while taking a seat on one of the sofas in the

room. No one objected.

What would be happening soon was something they had repeated many times before, a discussion about preparing for a rebellion against *that one*.

In the first place, they only accepted *that one* because *that one* was extremely powerful.

That one probably learned of Corpus of the Abyss from some outer circle member. One day *that one* suddenly appeared before them and displayed its strength.

Banejieri and the others knelt to *that one* because they thought *that one* would act as a deterrent against the strongest beings of this world. They certainly didn't do it to expand their organization.

But *that one* was the worst kind of leader.

First of all, Corpus of the Abyss was not founded to create disturbances in the middle of the continent. They would be troubled if *that one* thought they were just some convenient force that could be lent out for some pacts *that one* had.

So they decided to prepare a new deterrent against *that one*. It is the general consensus of everyone in the inner circle who got to meet *that one* the most.

Normally the more members were included in the plan, the higher the chances were of betrayal. If no one betrayed them, then that would be a demonstration of their lack of loyalty towards *that one*.

And at least for now, no one had betrayed them yet. The fact that Banejieri and others were still alive was proof of that.

Everyone here would have already been destroyed if they were betrayed. *That one* ruled the organization only to selfishly take Banejieri's and the others' research to strengthen itself. *That one* had been nothing more than a parasite feeding on them. Even so, *that one* would never think of tolerating their clandestine actions just because they were useful to *that one*.

Without a doubt, *that one* would take action to wipe out Banejieri and other conspirators if it ever doubted them.

That one didn't have the leniency or open-mindedness a ruler should possess. *That one* was too wary about everything.

Therefore, the fact that they were safe showed *that one* hadn't noticed their moves yet.

Fortunately, *that one* lacked the ability to dominate the undead.

(T/N: 欠けている could be interpreted either as not being good at something

or the complete absence of an ability. Who *that one* was supposed to be changes depending upon which meaning you chose so this was left vague)

Considering the difference in their strengths, *that one* could have easily controlled Banejieri and others if *that one* specialized in this field.

Don't think you can keep extorting us forever!

Banejier swept away the huge form of *that one* he just met from his mind along with his silent bellow.

OVERLORD

Character Profiles



SHIHOUTSU TOKITSU

| Demi-human

シハウツ・トキツ

The Burning Chef

Position ——— Head Chef of the Great
Underground Tomb of Nazarick

Residence ——— A break room adjacent to the cafeteria

Alignment ——— Neutral Evil ——— [Karma Value: -80]

Racial Levels — Ork ——— lvl 1

Class Levels — Cook ——— lvl 5
Super Cook ——— lvl 8
Master Chef ——— lvl 2
Berserker ——— lvl 2
Fury ——— lvl 7
Others

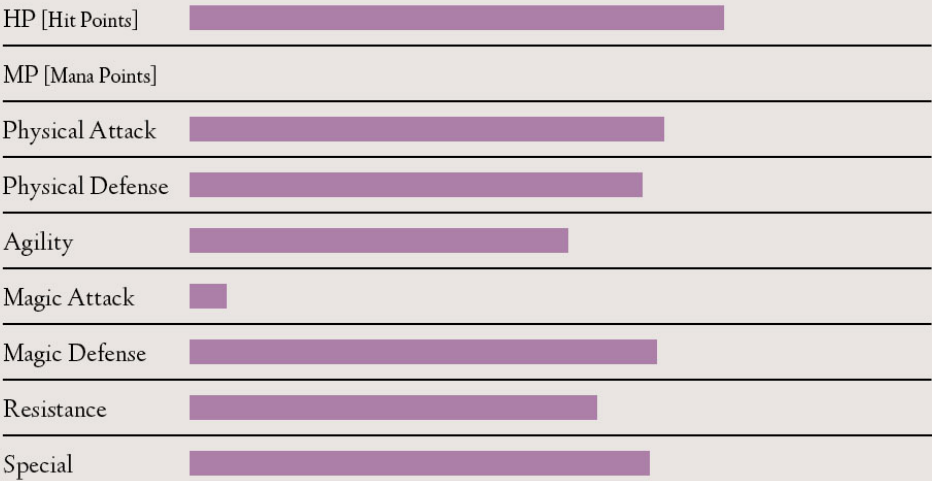
[Racial Levels] + [Class Levels] = 78 Total Levels



status 0 50 100

Ability Chart

[Comparative
ratio on a
scale of 100]



63

Character



ANKYLOURSUS

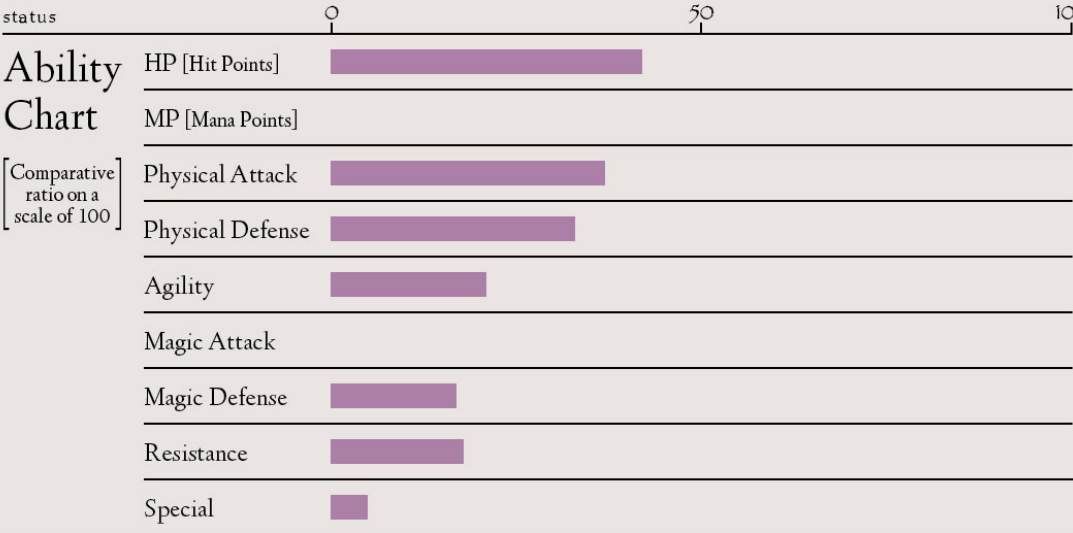
LORD

| Heteromorph

アンキロウルスス・ロード

One of the 15 Lords
of the Great Sea of Trees

- Position — Aura's Guinea Pig
- Residence — The Great Sea of Trees
- Alignment — True Neutral — [Karma Value: 0]
- Racial Levels — Unknown; no equivalent YGGDRASIL Race
- Class Levels — Unknown; no equivalent YGGDRASIL Class



12/41

VARIABLE TALISMAN

Heteromorph

ぱりあぶる・たりすまん

Does not want to change his armor



{ personal character }

The starting race he chose, Centipistorm, is a thief-type race and so is not suitable for tank selection. However, because he liked the exterior design, he did not change his race of origin. Therefore, he is less than second-rate in terms of ability. He is closer to a casual player rather than a competitive gamer when considering his build construction, player abilities, technique, and enthusiasm for the game. He still enjoys playing various games as a way to heal the wounds of his painful reality.



*First new volume in two
years!!*

*Next volume is coming out
soon as well!!*

Workload is very bad!!!!

So-Bin

Information

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The world is all yours.





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OVERLORD 15

The Half-Elf God-kin | Part I

10th Anniversary Artwork

Illustration by
so-bin





























